

Credo, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, Part Five: “Christmas”  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for January 26<sup>th</sup> 2020 (3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 1: 18-25

A number of years ago, during an interchurch Christmas celebration in the Parksville/Qualicum area, I had one of those “moments”—while listening to a colleague’s sermon—that perhaps **you** have had while listening to a sermon, perhaps even to one of **my** sermons! My colleague—from a denomination that will remain anonymous—was offering a reflection on the countless ways in which contemporary North American culture manages to mangle and distort Christmas: a list that included, but was by no means limited, to the much bemoaned commercialism that permeates our Christmas festivities. None of that particularly bothered me...until, that is, he reached his thundering climax in which announced with considerable zeal: “But none of that ought to bother us! They can have Christmas! At least we have Easter!”

Well: like I said at the outset, I had one of those moments which I am certain some of you have had when you have found yourself working very hard at behaving yourself and not crying out—part way through a sermon—“hell no”! And yes: you’ll be pleased to know that I did behave myself although the very fact that I can still recall that incident over 25 years down the road is a pretty good indication of the pride of place I give to Christmas: the pride of place I give to the miracle of Christmas which—of course—is precisely where we have now arrived in the Apostle’s Creed: a creed which, having proclaimed Jesus Christ as “**God’s** only Son” and as “**our** Lord”, now takes the further step, the decisive step: claiming that this Jesus “was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” In short: the ancient Christian Creed invites disciples to embrace the good news of Christmas.

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I want to try a wee bit of an experiment this morning, an experiment having to do with the inescapable fact that many United Church folk name the Virgin Birth as a key factor as to why they struggle with the Apostle’s Creed. The experiment I want to launch involves a temporary change to the wording of the Apostle’s Creed. Let’s briefly pretend...for the next 10 minutes or so...that this section of the Apostle’s Creed, instead of making the claim that he “was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the **Virgin** Mary” instead simply says: “he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the **woman** Mary”. In other words, I want us to focus for the next few moments not on the claim about Mary’s virginity, but rather on the seemingly more straightforward claim that it was through the action of the Holy Spirit, that Christ came to be born of a Judaeen woman named Mary.

By doing so...by doing so...my hope is that we can focus on that which is truly at stake—and yes—that which is truly **scandalous** about the birth of Jesus: namely, that which is captured by the word which ought to be our real focus here, and guess what.

The word I have in mind is most definitely **not** the word “virgin”. No! The key word here is “incarnation.” As a matter of fact, that word is explicitly used in the other well-known ancient Creed, the Nicene Creed which insists that “for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, **was incarnate** of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.” Or as the United Church of Canada’s own creed—the New Creed—puts it: “We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus **the Word made flesh.**” If you are looking for a quick and dirty definition of the word “incarnation”, you in fact have it right there in the words of the New Creed. The Christian insistence that the story of salvation begins not with the events of Easter, not with the public ministry of Jesus, not even with the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John, but that the story of salvation actually begins with his birth...

...that insistence is grounded in our belief in the incarnation: that *God was in Christ reconciling the world to God’s-self* as Paul puts it in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians...that the *Word was made flesh* as John puts it in the opening chapter of his Gospel. Incarnation! Word made flesh! That is the real scandal of Christmas...that is the real starting point for the distinctively Christian story...and yes: that is the piece of the puzzle which it is always tempting to paper over precisely because it is so terribly strange. Indeed: there is, more than one way in which to obscure the full mystery of the Word made flesh. On the one hand, you can deny that it was really and truly **flesh** that the Word became. On the other hand, you can deny that it was truly the **Word** that condescended to bear mortal human flesh. Both responses are perfectly understandable. But both undermine the beauty, the goodness and the truth of the Christian story. Let’s look at each temptation in turn.

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From the perspective of large segments of the ancient Church, the real scandal of the Christmas message, was the claim that heaven could truly come down to earth, the claim that God would participate in something so debased as taking on human flesh in all of its corruption and decay. The technical name for that heresy is “Docetism”, a term derived from a Greek verb that means “to seem” and from a related Greek noun best translated as “a phantom” or “an apparition”. In other words, what Docetism suggests is that Jesus was not *truly* human...but only gave the appearance—the illusion—of being human. And that, please note, is why—for my little experiment this morning—it is not inappropriate for us to speak of Mary as “the woman Mary” rather than as “the Virgin Mary”: the point being that the one thing we dare not lose sight of is her full humanity. Minus **her** humanity, talk of the incarnation becomes nonsense; only with Mary’s full participation is it possible to speak of the Word having been made **flesh.**

That, in turn, is why Matthew’s telling of the Christmas story is so indispensable. I know that Matthew lacks many of the elements we cherish in Luke: the journey to Bethlehem, the crowded inn, the Manger, the shepherds, the angels. All of that is sheer delight...and yet it is Matthew whose Gospel spells out the fact that there is something amiss with Christ’s birth: and that his father Joseph is well aware of the scandal. Whether you accept the Virgin Birth or not, Matthew’s Gospel makes it abundantly clear

that something was not entirely “kosher” with the conception of the Christ child: something which marks not only his birth but his entire story as quintessentially human. Trust me, folks! There is not a single person in this room who—if they were to spend some time on Ancestry.com...

...there is not a single person in this room who would not discover at least one “irregular” birth: either in their own line or in the line of someone close to them. To enter into the fabric of our shared humanity under just such circumstances only highlights the fact that those who wish to deny the fully humanity of Christ—who are embarrassed by the scandal of the incarnation, the scandal of the Word truly becoming (or **God** truly becoming!) **flesh**—are trying to protect God from an act of divine condescension that God appears to have been only too happy to undertake. Then again.

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My hunch...my hunch is that for many of us in the United Church of Canada—or in many other mainline Protestant Churches—the real point of discomfort isn’t with talk of the full humanity of Jesus, but rather with talk of his divinity: not whether the Word really became flesh, but whether it really was **the** Word, whether it was really and truly God’s own self to whom Mary gave birth when she gave birth to Jesus: in short, whether the Holy Spirit did, indeed, play a **unique** role in the birth of Jesus Christ, a role that marks him apart from all others, and marks his birth apart from every other birth. In a culture such as ours, one that has grown increasingly uneasy with distinctions of rank and privilege, there can be deep discomfort with what appears to be the ultimate claim of rank and privilege: the claim that Jesus was not only a good and wise and compassionate religious figure, but that he is actually God. Misused, that can sound terribly arrogant: the ultimate conversation stopper in which I—as a Christian—no longer need to listen to what someone else (some non-Christian know-nothing) may wish to offer me, since I hold the ultimate “trump” card! My guy’s God; what do you have to say to that buddy!

To that there are two quick and dirty responses: the first being that if the Christian conviction is correct—if God truly was in Christ reconciling the **world** to God’s self—then those who call themselves his followers ought to begin with the presumption that we don’t have a corner on the truth-market, but that the whole wide world will be radiant with the abundant truth Christ embodies. Whether from the direction of other faith-communities, secular philosophies, or the realm of science, we need not begin with the presumption that others have nothing of wisdom to share with us. Add to that a second conviction: namely that Christ came to this world not to lord it over others, but to set them free. I love the way in which the early Church Fathers emphasized that aspect of the Christmas story.

“God became what we are”—so ran their claim—“so that we could become what God is.” Let me repeat that because it is important and somewhat shocking! “God became what we are....so that we could become what God is.” The Greek technical

term for this is *theosis*, best rendered by the English word “divinization”. Divinization! That’s a daring word and yes, a daring concept. But consider! When understood in that way...what we have in the Christmas Gospel—far from being an attempt at narrowing our field of vision—is an expansive way of framing the work God has undertaken in Christ. So often we live up to J.B. Phillips lament that “our God is too small”. So often, even in our vision of salvation, we see nothing more than a desperate kind of rescue operation, in which God not only takes us “as we are” but pretty much “leaves us as we are”, warts and all. In effect we seem to imagine God saying to us: “There you are. I saved you, you jerk. Now get out of my face”. The Church Fathers—and Christian mystics of every stripe and persuasion—in their embrace of the mystery and miracle of Christmas...in their embrace of the Good News of the Word really and truly having been made flesh, go way beyond any such puny understanding of salvation. Theirs is a magnificent vision of what God seeks to do with humanity...an inspiring vision of our ultimate destiny: a destiny that dares to imagine a time when the image of God...

...the sadly torn and tarnished but never fully extinguished light of God that resides in every human heart...

...they envision a time when that image will be restored and that light set free to shine. A transformation...a **transfiguration**...a process which begins when the divine Word, God’s beloved child, becomes incarnate. Takes on human flesh...through Mary...in the flesh of the One we call Jesus. Or as the Apostle’s Creed insists: “he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the **woman** Mary.”

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Well. As you know full well, that isn’t quite what the Apostle’s Creed says. It says: “he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the **Virgin** Mary.” My little experiment involved replacing the word “Virgin” with the word “Woman”, at least for a brief while. But here...as I draw to a close...permit me to bring back the “V” word....permit me to speak of the Woman Mary...as the Virgin Mary.

And here I need to confess that I have never struggled with the notion of a virgin birth—more accurately a **virginal conception**—for Jesus. As I have said in the past: it’s a miracle that would involve a small manipulation of a strand of genetic material; it strikes me as a remarkably small-scale miracle, and one not entirely unheard of in nature. And yet: I know full well that not everyone is so inclined and that others—including at least some here today—struggle with the whole notion of the Virgin birth...may, in fact, find it the very thing that makes it hard for them to make the Apostle’s Creed **their** creed. All of which most certainly does raise the intriguing question: at the end of the day, if the whole point of the Christmas story is to present the incarnation—the Word having been made flesh in Jesus—what precisely does the Virgin Birth add to any of that? Why is it necessary? Is it necessary?

For what it’s worth, I am always reluctant to tell people what they **must** believe in order to call themselves a Christian, since many of those who fail to hold those beliefs

manage to lead lives that are far more reflective of Christ than my own life. Let's be clear on that. But permit me to borrow two thoughts from Karl Barth, both of which I find very helpful.

The first key point Barth makes—in his account of Christmas—is that the Virgin Birth ought to be regarded as the great “sign” of the Christmas miracle, much as the “Empty Tomb” is the great “sign” of the Easter miracle. Do you see what he is getting at? Even if you take the empty-tomb story with a grain of salt, you can still affirm that Christ rose, that he appeared to his disciples, and that he is truly alive! Similarly: even if you take the story of the virgin birth with a grain of salt, you can still affirm that in Christ, God's Word is made flesh. But Barth hastens to add that something tangible may be missing from that equation; that the vigor of the miracle may be lacking a bit of oomph if we embrace the “message” without also embracing the “sign” offered to us at Easter through the Empty Tomb, and the “sign” offered to us at Christmas through the Virgin Birth. I think that is a thought worth pondering.

The other point Barth makes involves Joseph: namely the fact that Joseph—as the representative male, the **human** male—is basically told to do something we males tend to hate, namely: sit on the side-lines and permit God to take over, as the divine seed is planted in Mary's womb. Barth notes that the male—the member of the human race most liable to fancy himself as the maker of history and the shaper of the human future—has no choice in this instance but to permit the Holy One to take the lead. And you know: when push comes to shove, that is not only a truth about Christmas, but it provides a pretty good hint as to what the entire Christian story is going to offer as it unfolds. As individuals we all imagine ourselves to be the centre of the story; indeed, as we come of age nothing bugs us more than when our parents make it difficult for us to step up to become the shaper of our own universe, with us dead-centre in that unfolding universe. And yet here, right from the get-go, one key party to the birth of Christ is, in effect, told to “sit this one out”, thereby giving clear notice that the Christian story is one in which we will not turn out to be the hero, one in which we won't even get to be the protagonist, although we will always be welcome to co-operate with the work of the protagonist, much as Mary and Joseph came to co-operate with that splendid work! You see: from the outset, God takes the initiative, acting on our behalf to accomplish that which we could never have accomplished for ourselves: in effect turning the old adage on its head. Not: don't just stand there, do something...rather: don't do anything...just stand there and watch and wait and wonder. Watch, wait, wonder **and marvel!** And you know: I was powerfully struck this week...

Powerfully struck to recall that when the Christ-child had come of age, he warned his followers that they would never receive the Kingdom of God until they had learned to receive like a child, which presumably meant: learning to receive it the way a child receives, without a hint of doubt or resentment that they are on the receiving end. As a very wise man once said to me: it may well be more blessed to give than to receive...but sometimes it's a whole lot easier to give, easier than being on the receiving end. Because we don't always welcome the reminder that our hands are empty, that

ultimately we are on the receiving end of most of life's good gifts, including that most precious of gifts. Mary's child. Word made flesh! Offered for the life of the world.

Sacred infant, all divine,  
what a mighty love was thine,  
thus to come from highest bliss,  
down to such a world as this!  
Hail, thou ever blessed morn,  
hail, redemption's happy dawn,  
sing through all Jerusalem,  
Christ is born in Bethlehem!

Thanks be to God!