

So today I'm going to talk about the virgin birth. But that's not exactly the question I was given for this Sunday. I was asked to talk about the immaculate conception in light of scientific reality. But I can't do that. I don't think anybody can, because the doctrine of the immaculate conception is not a scientific fact. It is not rooted in biology or physical reality. It is entirely a spiritual matter.

So I think we need to actually define our different church doctrines, because we have a doctrine of the virgin birth. We receive that from the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, as well as prophets such as the one we heard in Isaiah. This doctrine states that Jesus was born to a virgin named Mary and was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Then we have something called the doctrine of the immaculate conception, which is a Roman Catholic doctrine dating back to the nineteenth century. It states that Mary herself was conceived by her parents — she had a mom and a dad — but was conceived without original sin. That is to say, the Catholic Church teaches that every other person who has been or ever will be born is born with original sin, except for Mary, the mother of Jesus. Furthermore, the belief holds that Mary, throughout her entire life, committed no sin.

This is important in Catholic theology for a couple of reasons. One is that Mary, being close to God, needed to be sinless, because you cannot have sin in the presence of God, and Mary is in the presence of God quite literally. But also, the Catholic belief is that Mary was to be the new Eve — that is, to represent Eve before the fall into sin.

So the doctrine of the immaculate conception, the one I was asked to talk about, is not something believed by the majority of Protestant churches, including the United Methodist Church. It is not believed by most Orthodox churches either. Most Protestant and Orthodox churches teach that Mary was just as sinful as anyone else. Catholicism, on the other hand, teaches the immaculate conception — that Mary was born without sin.

So you see why I can't talk about the immaculate conception from a scientific standard: it is not a doctrine rooted in science. It is rooted in the theology of who Mary is. But I can talk about the related doctrine of the virgin birth. I can talk about where it came from, why it became important, and why it's okay to have doubts about it. I can talk about why it can be central to our faith and still be something outside of what we know to be human biology — how it is a powerful testament that is not, strictly speaking, an essential teaching of the church.

Where the Story Comes From

Let me start by saying that the earliest Christians didn't discuss the virgin birth of Jesus or the sinless nature of Mary at all. The earliest Christian beliefs were not concerned with where Jesus came from — that is a later addition to Christian teaching.

Let me define what I mean by "early" and "late." Early Christian teachings come from the middle of the first century; later Christian teachings come from the end of the first century. We're still talking about teachings that are thousands of years old — the difference is a matter of a few decades. But the earliest teachings of the church were wholly unconcerned with the origins of Christ.

Some of the earliest writings we have on Christianity come, of course, from Paul. From the Pauline letters we learn how the early church understood the nature of Christ, the message of Christ, and the role of the church. And from Paul, what do we learn about the birth of Jesus? Nothing. Paul does not address it. I don't think Paul cared about it. What Paul cares about is the message of Christ, the death of Christ, and how we as Christians are supposed to live in response to Christ. Where Jesus came from — if Paul knows, he doesn't seem concerned with teaching it. For Paul, it is not important where Jesus came from, who his parents were, or whether there was sin in his parents' lives. He is concerned with the life and death of Christ, and with how we live in response.

Fast forward a little, and after Paul's writings begin to circulate, you have the Gospel of Mark being written, probably sometime in the 60s or 70s — the first Gospel we still have record of. And Mark, like Paul, shows very little concern for where Jesus came from. Mark's Gospel begins with the baptism of Christ, and remember, Jesus is already an adult when he is baptized. It starts with Jesus in his adulthood and his ministry. Mark does not seem to care about the birth of Christ; it isn't important for the teaching he wants to share. Mark seems to know that Jesus had a mother named Mary, that he had brothers and sisters, that he was the son of a carpenter — but he gives us no insight into the birth. Mark either doesn't know, or, more likely, doesn't think it's important for us to know. What matters for Mark, as for Paul, is the life, ministry, and death of Christ.

It isn't until about the 80s — the original 80s — that you start getting detailed accounts of the birth of Jesus. And I think that makes sense, because starting in the 70s and 80s, that first generation of Christ's followers was beginning to die out. A second generation arose who knew the teachings, knew the stories, and began to ask: where did this man come from? Nobody had really addressed that yet. It was one of the great remaining mysteries of the life of Christ — everyone knew what happened once he was an adult, but what happened when he was a child?

So people began asking those questions, and gospel writers like Matthew and Luke tried to answer them, giving us accounts of the birth of Jesus. The stories of the genealogy and the birth of Jesus began circulating around the 80s.

The Matthew Problem

And that brings us to what I'll call the Matthew problem. It's hard to believe there would be a "problem" in Scripture, but Matthew has one. Every gospel writer, every letter writer in Scripture, has an agenda — something they want the reader to understand. Matthew has a big one: he wants his readers to know that Jesus Christ was a fulfillment of prophecy. That is very important to Matthew — that Jesus didn't just come out of nowhere, but came as a response to prophecy.

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew you will see him take prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures and apply them to the life of Jesus. You'll hear a phrase something like, "so it was to fulfill what had been written by the prophets," because Matthew is very concerned that people know Jesus fulfills prophecy.

So when he writes the birth account of Jesus, he takes that passage we heard from Ruth a moment ago — that passage from Isaiah — and reminds us of it. You've probably heard it before; we tend to read it during Advent: "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son and name him Emmanuel."

Except that's not quite what Ruth read a moment ago. Did you notice that? Ruth read, "A young woman will conceive and bear a son and name him Emmanuel." And it has everything to do with the Greek language. When Matthew writes, he's not pulling from the Hebrew — he's pulling from a Greek translation. In Hebrew, the word Isaiah uses is *almah*, a word that means "young woman." But when that word was translated into Greek, the word used was *parthenos*, which means "virgin." So the young woman of Isaiah became a virgin when translated into Greek. Matthew puts that into Scripture to tell us Mary was not just a young woman — she was a virgin, and Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

So if you want to identify the point in time when the church began to teach that Mary was a virgin, I think you can look to the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew — the place where, for the first time, the prophecy of Isaiah is applied to the life of Jesus, and Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary.

Getting Out of the Weeds

I picked a different scripture for our second reading today — something from Paul's letter to Timothy that I don't think I've ever used in this church before. But I think it helps us get out of the weeds a little. Because as soon as we start talking about all the different ways Scripture has been translated, and whether the virgin birth is historical fact or a teaching the church developed later, we can lose sight of the point.

I think the letter to Timothy pulls us out of the weeds, because in it Paul urges Timothy to ignore all these disputes over myths and endless genealogies. And I can't help but think this was written in response to that same deep desire people were beginning to feel at the

end of the first century — the desire to know where Jesus came from. Notice that both Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels not just with an account of Jesus's birth, but with his genealogy, because people were getting very concerned about where he came from.

And here is Paul, writing to Timothy: stop concerning yourselves with all of this. Stop concerning yourselves with the genealogies. Stop concerning yourselves with the weeds of the faith. Focus on what matters.

Paul talks about the danger of false teachings. I think a lot of times we hear "false teachings" and think of things that intentionally mislead people. But reading this letter to Timothy, I've come to think false teachings here mean something a little different — teachings that distract us from the essential truths of the gospel. And for Paul, the essential truth of the gospel is love. He says as much right in this letter: the goal of his instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. I don't think the false teachings he warns against were about getting doctrines right or wrong. I think they were about whatever pulls us away from mirroring the love of God.

What Actually Matters

So I will say: I do believe in the virgin birth. But maybe not in the way a church doctrine would state it. Because at the end of the day, I don't think it's actually important that the church understand the biology of what was happening at the birth of Jesus. I think that's the weeds.

What I think is important is that we recognize God was up to something powerful in the world with the inbreaking of Christ. And maybe the virgin birth is our way of saying that this was not the ordinary — that something extraordinary was happening. It's not a matter of biological importance; it's a matter of spiritual importance. At the birth of Jesus, we are saying that Jesus is not just some guy with some good ideas. We are saying that in this moment there was a unique, powerful breaking-in of time where God touched the earth, incarnated in a child who would be the Christ, the anointed one of God.

So when we talk about the virgin birth — whether we take it as a strictly literal account of what happened, or as a matter of spirituality and faith — I think we're saying the same thing: that this is a special, unique, and wondrous birth story. And the virgin part isn't what makes it special. The God part is what makes it powerful — that this is God choosing to be with us, however God does that, whether by an act of biology or an act of faith.

The powerful part of the story of the birth of Christ isn't that Mary was sinless. It isn't whether Mary was a virgin or not. The powerful part of the story is that God chose to act with grace toward us — that God chose to enter the world powerless but filled with love.

And when I talk about the story of the virgin birth, I am not really talking about Mary. I am talking about the power of God.

Prayer

Friends, let's be in an attitude of prayer together.

Holy, beloved One, what a gift you have given us today — that in coming to know you more and more, coming with our challenging questions, we discover that spending time in the weeds, spending time debating the intricacies of our theologies, sometimes distracts us from the things of true importance: that we carry your love into the world. Your love, which was shown to us in a powerless child, born of Mary. In Christ I pray. Amen.