

Born of the Virgin Mary

Incarnate: Why the Manger Matters

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Tabloid or Factoid?

I don't go to the grocery store much, but around the holidays I usually make a couple appearances. However, I haven't quite warmed up to the self-checkout. I prefer to go through the normal line and check out with a human being. But there are a couple of liabilities with the normal line: the candy and the tabloids. I'm still like a kid; I want to get some candy when I go through the line. And even though I know they're crazy, I can't help but look at the tabloid headlines.

Do you read the headlines on the tabloids? Don't act like you don't notice them; we all do. But do you linger? Are you intrigued? Or are you completely skeptical? I've got a few tabloid headlines for you to consider this morning. All of them are real headlines except for one. See if you can spot the fake tabloid headline in my list.

- Orphaned elephant raised by porcupine.
- Hubby's bad breath kills his wife.
- Alien Bible Found! They worship Oprah!
- Shocking CIA leak reveals: Dick Cheney is a robot!
- Young virgin gives birth to a baby boy.

Which of these headlines will you never find in the grocery store checkout line? That's right, the last one. The one that deals with the virgin birth. Ironically, it's the only one that's actually true.¹

Sure, we're intrigued by the weird news we find in the tabloids. But for the most part, we don't believe things that sound fantastical. Modern man is a skeptical creature. We've all drunk the Kool-Aid of scientific rationalism. Our culture has a hard time believing anything that can't be proven by science. And so, when modern man comes to the doctrine of the virgin birth he puts it in the category of a fantastic tabloid.

But the virgin birth is a foundational truth the church has believed for over 2,000 years. The Bible teaches it. Our ancient creeds affirm it. And so does our own twenty-first century Statement of Faith.

Is it necessary to believe in the virgin birth? For the last hundred years or so modern theologians have questioned the virgin birth. But at First Free, we still believe it matters. As the Nicene Creed says, it was "for us men and for our salvation that Jesus came down from heaven: he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human." The virgin birth is a doctrine that's linked to our salvation.

Can it be proven scientifically? No. But when we're dealing with God, we're not dealing with the merely scientific. That doesn't mean that the ways of God and the findings of science are at odds. It's just to say God acts in ways science can't measure. Creation is a miracle. God spoke his Word and the world came into existence. Salvation is also a miracle. How else can sinful man be reconciled to a holy God? How can we be united to Christ? What we've learned during this series is that the

¹ Cf. John Starke, "[The Problem of Miracles](#)"

Son of God became a man to save us from our sins. That is a mystery. We can't simply wrap our head around it with scientific charts and graphs.

The marvelous mystery of Christmas cries out for a miraculous beginning. If we believe that God has saved us in Christ, we shouldn't be surprised that Christ's life is accompanied by miracles—the first miracle in the virgin's womb and the last miracle at the empty tomb.

All of the great acts in the Bible are accompanied by signs. Signs are miracles that break into the normal course of things to get our attention, to let us know that God is up to something significant. Signs point beyond themselves to something else. Signs signify something. Signs have significance.

Isaiah 7:14 predicted the virgin birth. It says this, “The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel.”²

The virgin birth is a sign.³ It is a miracle. It breaks into the normal course of life to get our attention. It lets us know God is up to something significant. But what exactly does the sign of the virgin birth signify? Why is it significant for us men and for our salvation? That's the question I want to try to answer this morning.

Please open your Bibles to Luke 1. We're going to read Luke's account of the annunciation. The annunciation is where the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and announces the virgin birth (or more specifically the virgin conception) and lets Mary know that her son will be the Savior. This story is full of signs and points us to the significance of the virgin birth.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” ²⁹But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

³⁴And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

³⁵And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

This is the Word of the Lord

This passage is divided into roughly three parts: the appearance of the angel (26-30), the announcement of the angel (31-37), and the answer of Mary (38).

The appearance and the announcement teach us a number of significant things about our salvation—things that the sign of the virgin birth point to. And Mary's final answer to this announcement teaches us how to respond to the miracle of Christmas.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

³ This line of thought comes from Karl Barth, “The Miracle of Christmas,” in *Church Dogmatics* I.2. section 15.

THE APPEARANCE (26-30)

Let's begin with the appearance. The significance of the appearance is that our salvation begins with God's gracious initiative.

In Luke, Gabriel's appearance to Mary follows directly after his appearance to John the Baptist's father, Zechariah. And the comparison and contrast of these two scenes draws out a number of truths.⁴

First of all, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth weren't able to have children. They'd tried, but they were infertile. So they were praying for a child. The angel appears to them in response to their prayer. But here, with Mary, there's no indication she's been praying for anything specific. The angel simply appears to her. Luke wants us to see that this whole thing with the virgin birth is a result of God's initiative from beginning to end.

Another point of contrast between Zechariah and Mary has to do with their status. Zechariah's a very important man. A priest, serving in the temple, in Jerusalem. But Mary's a nobody, living in Nowheresville.⁵ She's a young girl, certainly a peasant, and probably illiterate. And she's living in Galilee, in Nazareth. Remember what Nathanael said? "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" There's nothing remarkable about Mary. But Gabriel comes to her. This highlights God's grace.

And grace is the first word out of Gabriel's mouth. "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you." God's favor and his grace are essentially the same thing in the Bible. Mary's troubled by this statement because she doesn't understand why she would receive God's grace and favor. But the angel repeats his message, "You have found favor with God."

The Christmas story is all about the gracious initiative of God. We don't deserve God's salvation. And we certainly can't earn it or manufacture it. The gospel is the announcement that God has graciously broken into our darkness of his own initiative to save us.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT (31-37)

The appearance of the angel sets up his announcement to Mary in verses 31-37. The angel goes on to tell Mary that she will "conceive in [her] womb and bear a son, and [she] shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

That's the first part of the announcement and that's where we find the main significance of the virgin birth. And we'll deal with that in due course. But before we deal with the significance, I want to get to the sign of the virgin birth.

In verse 34, Mary says to Gabriel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Or literally, "How will this be, since I've never been with a man?"⁶ The text began by emphasizing Mary's virginity. We're told twice in verse 27 that Mary was a virgin. And now we're told again.

⁴ David Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Darrell Bock, *Luke*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

⁵ Garland

⁶ Garland

Mary's a very young girl, probably around 14 years old. But she's not ignorant or naïve. She knows how babies are made. Maybe her parents were like some of your parents. Maybe they slipped a book under her bedroom door that told her about the birds and the bees. Or maybe the synagogue in Nazareth had some ancient equivalent of what we do with our fifth graders. Maybe they had a couple like Jim and Donna Logan that were assigned the task of talking to her about human anatomy.

We don't know how she knew, but she knew it was impossible for virgins to have babies. It was inconceivable to get pregnant when she'd never been with a man.

And so she asks Gabriel, "How will this be? Help me understand." She's not like Zechariah in the previous passage. She's not skeptical, but she is intrigued. She doesn't understand, but she wants to understand. And so Gabriel helps her to understand how this miracle will take place. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."

That's the sign. Jesus will be conceived through the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. But what does it signify? I want to draw out six things that in a sense summarize what we've been learning throughout this series.

New Creation

First, it signifies that the incarnation is the result of God's creative power. The angel tells Mary, "the Spirit will come upon you." This language is intentionally alluding to Genesis 1.⁷ In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters (1:2).

Luke wants us to see that Jesus' conception is a new creation. The point seems to be that "the creator God who brought life out of nothing and created human beings from the dust is also able to create life in the womb."⁸ The virgin birth is a sign that Jesus is a new beginning. He's not a development of anything that's gone before. As one theologian says, "He is a divine intrusion: the last, great, culminating eruption of the power of God into the plight of man."⁹

Our sinful human nature couldn't produce the perfect human nature of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ It required a new creation. And it makes sense that if we want to be made new, that we would have to be made new by the one who was made new in Mary's womb.

Fully Man

But even though the virgin birth points to a new creation, it is not a creation *ex nihilo*; it is *ex Maria*. The virgin birth speaks of a new creation within a human womb.¹¹ The angel says to Mary, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son" (v. 31). This all reinforces what we've been learning all along, that Jesus is fully man. Yes, he's a new creation of God. But he's also the son of a human girl. He was conceived in Mary's womb.

⁷ Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*.

⁸ Bock

⁹ Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 37. Macleod is drawing on Karl Barth.

¹⁰ Barth, "The Miracle of Christmas," in *Church Dogmatics* I.2, section 15

¹¹ *Evangelical Convictions*, 101

Fully God

But he's also fully God. As the angel announces Mary will have a son, he goes on to say that "He will be called the Son of the Most High." He's not just Mary's son, which refers to his humanity. He's not just David's son, which refers to his humanity. He's also the Son of the Most High, which refers to his deity.

A lot of people want to know if the virgin birth is a necessary doctrine. Do we have to believe it to be a Christian? Could the incarnation have happened in another way? Wayne Grudem doesn't quite answer the question, but he gets to the heart of the issue. He says that God could've taken on human flesh in heaven and then descended to earth. But then we would struggle to believe he was fully man. Or God could've been born of a human father and mother, and then combined his nature to him, but then we would struggle to believe he was fully God.¹²

The way God did it makes the incarnation make sense. The sign helps us see the significance of the incarnation. The miracle of the virgin birth points to the mystery of the incarnation.

Israel's Promised Messiah

Not only is Jesus fully God and fully man, he's also Israel's promised Messiah. This was the point of my sermon last week, so I won't dwell on it here. But simply notice how much emphasis Gabriel puts on this in verses 32-33. "The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Clearly, Luke wants us to see that Jesus is the promised Davidic king, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. It only makes sense that the arrival of the Messiah would be marked by the miracle of the virgin birth.

Without Sin

Next, the virgin birth highlights the sinlessness of Jesus. Chris will deal with the sinlessness of Jesus next week. I simply want to think through how his sinlessness relates to the virgin birth.

There are some theologians who want to figure out exactly how original sin is transmitted. Some say that Adam's sin is transmitted through procreation. And since Jesus doesn't have a human father, biologically speaking, he can be sinless. The problem with this view is that it assumes sin is transmitted through the father. But Scripture doesn't say that. Also, why wouldn't Jesus inherit sin from Mary? In spite of what the Roman Catholic Church says, we don't believe that Mary was sinless.¹³

The fact of the matter is original sin is a mystery to us. We know that sin entered the world through Adam (Rom. 5:12). Through Adam's disobedience we were all made sinners (Rom. 5:19). "Somehow the sin of Adam has affected us all."¹⁴ But the Bible doesn't say our sinful nature comes to us through some biological machinery. Romans presents it as more of a legal reality.¹⁵ Regardless, it's a mystery.

Grudem says, somehow, in Christ the line from Adam is partially interrupted. He's human, in the line of Adam, but he comes from Adam in a different way, through the virgin birth. This points to

¹² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 530

¹³ Wellum, 236 n. 74

¹⁴ *Evangelical Convictions*, 82

¹⁵ Wellum, 236 n. 74

the fact that human corruption and guilt didn't belong to Christ.¹⁶ And that's good news. For if we're in Christ, the guilt of sin doesn't belong to us either. Instead we have Christ's righteousness.

We simply don't know how all of this works. It's a mystery. But we know that the sign of the virgin birth signifies that Jesus is without sin. The miracle points to the mystery. Right after the angel announces the virgin conception, he says to Mary, "Therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God." And Jesus had to be without sin to save us from our sin (cf. Mt. 1:21).

Miracles and Mystery

The last thing the virgin birth signifies is the miraculous nature of the incarnation. Throughout this sermon, I've been saying the miracle points to the mystery. But I've yet to ground this point in the text. It's implied throughout. But it's made explicit in the last words of the annunciation, in verses 36-37.

Gabriel says to Mary, "Your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

There are many points of comparison and contrast with John the Baptist's beginnings and Jesus' beginnings. This last one is foundational. Throughout the Bible, there are special children that are born to barren women. Think of Isaac, or Jacob, or Samuel. It makes sense that John the Baptist would also be born to a barren woman. After all he was the greatest prophet.

Elizabeth's pregnancy was amazing. But Mary's was even more amazing. Elizabeth's pregnancy happened when there was no hope for a child. But Mary's pregnancy happened when there was no possibility for a child.¹⁷ She had never been with a man. It was a true miracle. It proved the fact that *all* things are possible with God.

Friends, I know that it's easy to be skeptical. And it's hard to believe in the miraculous. But if we don't believe in the miraculous, we are without hope.

Remember what Peter said to Jesus when he encountered the rich young ruler? "Who then can be saved?" To which Jesus replied, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:25-26). Creation is impossible without God. And salvation is impossible without God. It only makes sense that when God sent the Savior into the world that he did the impossible. The miracle of the virgin birth points to the mystery of the incarnation and the mystery of our salvation.

In our sin, we want to be able to figure everything out. We want to be able to explain everything. We want to be able to fix everything. But when it comes to our sin, we can't fix it. And we can't exhaustively explain how God fixes it. It's a miraculous mystery.

We need help to know how to respond to this miraculous mystery. Thankfully, in this passage we have a model of how to respond.

THE ANSWER (38)

Mary has just been confronted with an announcement that's hard to wrap your head around. How does she respond?

¹⁶ Grudem, 530

¹⁷ Garland

In verse 38, she answers the angel's announcement. She says, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Her answer to Gabriel tells us how to respond to this passage. We're called to respond with humble submission to the gospel.

The first thing we learned is salvation is a result of God's gracious initiative. Everything begins with God. He initiates. We respond. God saves. We receive his salvation. We don't always understand. But we're called to trust God's work in redemption and his work in our lives. That's Mary's response.

We also learned that Jesus is fully God and fully man. He's the promised Messiah. He's the king. And his kingdom shall have no end. How do we respond to these truths? We submit to the king with humility. That's what Mary did. She said, "I am the servant of the Lord." She said, "Let it be to me according to your word."

Mary is the model of how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Later in the Gospel of Luke, people come to Jesus and say, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you." But Jesus answered them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk. 8:16-17; cf. 11:27-28). His point is that being a part of the family of God is not a matter of flesh and blood; it's not a matter of ethnicity or family. It's all bound up in believing in Jesus and following him. Those in the family of God are those who hear the Word of God and do it.

But that doesn't mean that Mary wasn't in the family of God. Because what do we see her doing in this passage? Hearing the Word of God and doing it. Hearing the promise of God and surrendering. She's the first disciple in the New Testament. We should follow her example.

Another reason Mary's a perfect example of being a disciple of Jesus is because Jesus says almost exactly what Mary says, when he's in the Garden of Gethsemane. When facing the cross, Jesus, like Mary, said, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Lk. 22:42). He's basically saying, "Let it be to me according to your word."

At Jesus' first advent, he came humbly to offer his life in place of ours. He came to suffer and die for our sins. If we want to have forgiveness of sins and eternal life, we need receive his gift of salvation this Christmas. And then we need to humbly surrender our lives to him as we wait for his return.