

Sermon for December 21, 2025
"Un-deconstructing the Virgin Birth"

Matthew 1:18-25

What's a righteous man to do? "When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." We hear that and we say "Yea, the virgin birth." I am sure that's not what Joseph said. He wasn't there yet. When he discovered that Mary was expecting the only conclusion he could have reached is that she had been unfaithful. She had betrayed him.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. So what's a righteous man to do in this situation? That all depends on what you mean by "righteous." The righteous follow God's laws and the laws of Moses are clear. Adulterers are to be stoned. It's not about what we want or about us. It is about following God's laws. On the other hand the righteous seek to learn from God and act according to God's values and example. God is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. So the righteous would seek to act with mercy and grace. Being a righteous man, of this second type, Joseph chose not to expose Mary to public scrutiny and possibly capital punishment. I am sure it wasn't easy. He was hurt and felt betrayed, but he decided to divorce her quietly.

Just as Joseph had come to this difficult decision, it happened. An angel comes to him in a dream and says, "Joseph, Mary has not betrayed you. Take her as your wife. The child she bears was from a miracle of God through the Holy Spirit. He will be Emanuel, God with us!" So that resolved it! Well, I am not so sure. It took a lot of trust and faith for Joseph to take the word of an angel in a dream. Yet, where there is great faith, there is also doubt. I imagine at times he wondered if that dream had just been his imagination. I am sure he wondered at times if God was playing him for a dupe. Despite all that, he took Mary as his wife, and she bore Jesus.

What's a righteous person to do? Like Joseph, many modern Christians wrestle with the message of the Virgin Birth. Of course there is the whole impossibility of it according to the natural laws as we know them, but it's deeper than that. In the modern era we have begun methodically studying our scripture and doctrines more closely. As we have, inconsistencies and problems have arisen.

For instance, if we say we believe the Bible, then we will want to know what it actually says, we will study it very closely and try to understand its context and transmission. So Bible scholar began to take apart, or deconstruct, the passages to better understand them. In the popular mind we conflate the two accounts of Jesus' birth found in Matthew and Luke. We imagine the shepherds from Luke coming to the manger and the wise men from Matthew following on their heels, but when scholars looked closely at Luke and Matthew, they found what appeared to them to be two separate stories, not just the same story told from two different perspectives. The chain of events and the geography in the two stories did not seem to match up. They also noticed that none of the earliest Christian writings like Paul's letters or Gospel of Mark contained anything about the virgin birth. Some concluded that the story of the virgin birth was developed later to express a belief in Jesus as the Son of God.

They also looked at the literature of the ancient world and found that before Jesus and up to his time virgin birth stories were a dime a dozen. Any number of gods, demigods, heroes, philosophers, kings, and generals had virgin birth stories attached to them. We wouldn't take any of these myths or legends seriously, so why this one?

On a theological level some would say that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth just doesn't work for the modern person. They wondered why do we need to believe in a virgin birth to believe in Jesus? If it is just about Jesus being born by a miracle, that is useless, after all aren't all births miracles? Some would go even farther and say that the doctrine of virgin birth was not merely irrelevant, but even harmful. They would point to the way that the Virgin Mary has been used to stereotype and denigrate women down through the ages.

So many modern Christians have problems with the Virgin Birth. Yet our scripture and our creeds speak of Jesus being born of a virgin. The church and faith that nurtured us seems to value this belief. This meant something to Christians down through the ages and it was passed down to us. What's a righteous person to do?

When I was a kid I liked to take things apart. I just wanted to see what was inside of radios and clocks and toasters and TV's and such. My mother wanted to nurture my curiosity, but she had to lay down some ground rules. I could not take anything apart that was not certified by her as already broken. It would not do for me to take apart the TV and then my father not be able to watch the evening news. Secondly, anything I took apart that was electric, had to be unplugged. I took apart a lot of clocks and radios and toaster and such. Even my mother's organ. As I took them apart, I gaining an understanding of how they worked. Sometimes I found the reason they were broken. Perhaps there was a loose wire or a clearly burner out

vacuum tube, or a broken spring. Sometimes I would find cobwebs and dust and dead bugs that were messing up the system.

I learned a lot by taking things apart. Then I learned even more by putting them back together. Most of the time when I put them back together they worked! Sometimes curious things happened when I put them back together. One time when I put an electric clock back together, it ran backwards. So I fixed it – again. I learned how to fix them, but I did not learn enough to build a clock or radio from scratch.

Taking them apart taught me a lot and helped me to understand. Then putting them back together helped me learn even more. More importantly while taking apart a broken clock or radio helped me learn, it was not until I put it back together that I finally had a working clock or radio.

What's a righteous person to do with the virgin birth? Take it apart. Look at its parts and see how they work. Carefully examine the scriptures and creeds. I believe when you do you will find out what it is really all about. The virgin birth is not about believing in a miracle for the sake of believing in a miracle. It's not a test of faith.

I believe that you will find that it is all about Emanuel. It is about the belief that God is with us. In Jesus, the Almighty Creator of all things, came to dwell with us in human form. Jesus is more than just a really, really holy person. Somehow he is the only begotten Son of God. Through him we can know God and follow God as righteous people. The doctrine of the Virgin Birth is another way of expressing what John was saying when he said that the Eternal Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.(John 1:1-14)

When you take it apart, look also for things that should not be there. Look for the cobwebs and loose wires that may be gumming up the theological system. If in the process of deconstructing the virgin birth you discover sexism, I would argue that it should be cleaned out. That it is something that has crawled up in there through the ages and attached itself to the belief. That it is the dust and the dirt that should be removed. God created us all in the Divine image, and we are all loved equally and blessed equally by Jesus' birth.

However, don't stop at taking it apart. Start putting it back together. Gestalt psychologists had a saying, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." When we look at something, we see more than is there. We see a whole, even if some of the parts are missing. There is more to the virgin birth than just the texts and doctrines. Having all the parts of a radio does not allow you to hear the music. Knowing the parts of the belief in the virgin birth is good, but it is even better to have them working together. Then we can see the whole.

What's a righteous person to do with the Virgin Birth? Learn from Joseph's example. Seek to respond to it as a righteous person. Seek to know God and follow God's example of mercy and kindness and justice.

Begin by getting to know it. Read the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. Study them closely. Seek to understand the deeper truths behind them.

Then put it all together. Wrestle with it if you have to. If you go to the theological work bench of your soul and find the Virgin Birth has been deconstructed, then seek to un-deconstruct it. See if you can reintegrate the parts into a meaningful whole. It may not be easy I am sure it wasn't easy for Joseph.

What's a righteous person to do? A righteous person seeks the truth. A righteous person wrestles, sometimes with their faith, and grows. Learn from Joseph's struggle to be righteous. Jesus said, "seek and ye shall find." I am not saying that an angel will come to you in a dream to explain it all. It might happen, but maybe you will just grow in faith.

Then, celebrate that God came to be with us. Even if you can't quite get the pieces back together. Stand in awe, like the shepherds, that God is with us. Like the magi, bring your gifts. Like Mary, ponder these things in your hearts.

You might say, "Well, preacher what do you believe?" I believe in Jesus' Virgin birth. I have learned a lot by taking it apart, but I have learned even more by putting it back together. Let's talk about it.