

ADVENT 3: “There’s Something about Mary” Rev. John G Smith

(This is not the sermon I preached, but I have tried to capture most of what I said. This sermon is quite a bit longer than the one I preached without notes.)

The year 2008 is coming to a close. Time to put things in perspective.

I heard a news story this week about who was the NUMBER 1 most GOOGLED person this year. You might think the obvious: Barack Obama, but no, you would be wrong. It was Britney Spears. (for reference: Barack was number 2)

I don’t know why so many people are interested in Britney Spears, but I do know that a large portion of what is written about her will be used to write her biography someday, and a large portion of what will be written about her will not be true. It would be like trying to write someone’s life story using the National Enquirer or People Magazine as your key references.

It’s common practice to embellish stories, and often it is done for the right reasons. The person in question may need to be lifted up or celebrated for some reason, and the use of analogy, metaphor and legend is pretty common. Take for example, the Beatles.

Which brings us to our topic today: a consideration of the retelling of the Mary story in the gospels.

All throughout my preaching ministry, I’ve always felt that it is incumbent on we who would preach the word of God, to offer enlightenment and truth, in the face of constantly shifting moral values, and the rapidly changing demographic of our country and our culture. In the last 125 years, the amount of Biblical scholarship and theological inquiry has been nothing short of an explosion going off in the religions of the world. Yet many of our churches are full of people who have never been exposed to some of that new teaching. I’m not exactly sure why this is. You would think that church people would WANT to have up to date discourse about matters of the faith! It’s GOOD to learn something new about something old, even if it might be a little bit painful.

Inevitably, being a person who can’t keep quiet, I put my self out there on a limb and try to offer some of these new teachings, as a way of bringing forward the faith agenda of the church. Again, I think you should expect this of me.

At my last church in Aurora, I distinctly remember the sermon I preached few years ago about the virgin birth, (that it is an early and ancient myth used to describe the births of great people, to bring honour and glory to them, long after they are dead and gone. Such was the case with the two narratives we have about Mary, the mother of Jesus, one in Matthew, the other in Luke. It’s notable that Mark, the first gospel written, does NOT have a virgin birth story. The tradition had not yet been developed and applied to Jesus in that earlier time.) The other little bit of scholarship I added was that the whole virgin birth story hangs on the English translation of one little word. English translations are far from perfect, that’s why there are so many different ones available!! It’s not always easy to translate words that have layers of meaning in culture and context, and try to bring the words into our culture and

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context with the same meaning. IN fact, it’s impossible. **The little word is virgin.** It comes from a line of scripture (note to reader: NOT in the gospels and not from Paul, whose writings pre-date the gospel narratives) in Isaiah chapter 7: 14: “behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Immanuel. “ If you know Handel’s Messiah, you know that line of scripture. The literal Hebrew translation of the word “virgin” is “young maiden”. The prophet was saying to the people of Israel during the time of their great exile: there **will** be a time when a young woman will be able to give birth to a baby in PEACE. Babies will one day again be born in a time of joy and beauty, a time without fear, a time when we truly know that our God is with us and is blessing us.

Do you see how wonderful that passage is? How it provides such a hopeful PREGNANT image of the time that WILL come (and in fact it did), a time when oppression and war would cease. The people could settle down again in the land, have children, and grow food, and be happy. Does it matter that the woman was a sexual virgin? Not to the prophet. Did he intend to say that? Probably not, though of course, how would I know what Isaiah intended to write over 2500 years ago? The best scholars make educated guesses when dealing with old texts like this.

But consider this:

That ONE word has been misconstrued for centuries. It fed into Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of the Jesus story, and then the church, in its early years, used it to subjugate women, and hold virginity out as the only way for a woman to be an ideal woman. More about that another time.

OK, so after that sermon, a young woman approached me with daggers in her eyes. I had, according to her, completely torn apart the heart of the Christmas story, left it in shreds, and she would NEVER celebrate Christmas again with joy or enthusiasm. I guess for her, the whole Christmas story hangs upon the translation of one tiny word. That makes me sad. I for one, believe that the Christmas story is a celebration of Jesus, the Son of God, not so much his lineage. (especially since Luke and Matthew disagree on the ancestral heritage of Jesus; there are a lot of contradictions in the “Begats”) Everytime I speak of this stuff, people are quick to accuse me of not believing in Jesus. You know what? I’m not talking about Jesus. I love Jesus, but nothing about Mary or Joseph or the shepherds or anything else will change that.

So, on the one hand, I’ve got a responsibility to preach the truth, and to offer enlightenment on things Biblical, but on the other hand, it’s my responsibility to uphold the fragile faith traditions of every single individual in the church.

Yikes!

Now, let’s get something straight. I’m not about ruining anyone’s Christmas. And in fact, when you take out some of the supernatural elements of the story, especially the virgin birth in the Christmas Eve nativity story, you are actually left with an even more powerful and wonderful story about God’s initiative in Humanity. In fact, for many people, it makes the whole thing easier to accept and believe. It then broadens our understanding. It expands our notion of God.

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Now, there are over a dozen famous examples of historical attributions of virgin births in other cultures, both before Jesus and after. Most of the examples (you can Google them if you want) come from cultures in the Middle East, in other words, right next door to the place where Jesus was born. It makes sense that the early Christians wanted to prove that their God and their religion was far and away better than the others. They took the myths of the surrounding cultures, and tried to show how much better Jesus was. Did they do this to lift up Mary, his mother?

Or did they do this to lift up Jesus, the one who was crucified, and resurrected?

Of course: it was to honour Jesus.

And let’s remember: there would be no Christmas story without the Easter story. **It** is primary. It was only in the light of Easter that the early disciples and the nascent Christian church began to see that Jesus was MORE than they had ever imagined or hoped for. He was their Messiah. Despite the fact that he never made that claim for himself, that he never saw himself starting a new religion, and that he probably had no idea that he would be executed as a common criminal, Jesus was somehow alive in the hearts and minds of the people who followed him. It was exciting, and energizing, and life-giving. Followers of Jesus wanted to find ways to speak of him, and their experience of him, in the most superlative way they could think of. The virgin birth was ONE way (among others) of doing just that!

So you see, letting go of the virgin Mary doesn’t take anything at all AWAY from Jesus. In fact, it glorifies him all the more. How could the very Son of God, be born to such lowly parents, so far removed from the corridors of power and influence? That in itself is pretty miraculous.

Does it all hinge on Mary’s virginity though?

Patriarchal systems, some of which are still evident today, tend to over-emphasize the sexuality of women. They must cover themselves so that they aren’t showing skin, because the men, those scoundrels, just can’t help but be filled with lust when they see a little skin. But, it goes deeper than that. Remember the stories of creation, the story of Adam and Eve, which describes women as the secondary part of the human creation, brought from the rib of Adam, and who in the garden, was the one who listened to the evil snake and brought upon herself and the rest of humanity, the curse of God. It is, according to those old legends, **all women’s fault**. Taking it a step further then, the early church FATHERS decided that since Jesus was the only true son of God, then in order for him to be free of original sin, then his MOTHER must have been free of original sin too, because of course, the concept of original sin depends on the human matter of sex, and if Mary had had sex, then it would be impossible for Jesus to be born free of sin.

Do you follow?

Therefore, though it is not stated anywhere in scripture at all, not even in other ancient near –eastern texts, the church taught and still teaches, that Mary was **herself** conceived by the holy spirit, that she was not in fact born as the result of the act of intercourse. It’s called Immaculate Conception.

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Some writers today, including Marcus Borg and John Crossan, whom I greatly admire, will postulate that early people did not properly understand the concept of impregnation. They would have us believe that because medicine and science had not developed very much, you can’t blame people of that era for not understanding how it works. Frankly, I find that a little bit insulting. I think people have always known how it works. The first New Testament writers weren’t really all that concerned about Mary, except that she gave birth to the person whom we would come to know as the very Son of God. That’s all it is about.

So what is a faithful person to do? Is the Christmas story an “all-or-nothing” proposition? IS the Christian faith an “all-or-nothing” proposition?

My friends, there are many who have and will simply abandon a church that cannot grow up enough, or have enough of an adult faith, to embrace Christianity (and indeed all religions) with a fully functioning adult mind. I honestly don’t think God created us with brains, so that we would have to leave them at the door when we entered God’s house!

Part of the reason it’s tempting to leave the church is because the pace of change is so slow, and the resistance to theological change in particular, is absolutely massive. Believe me, that one woman at the door of the church, telling me I’d spoiled her Christmas, is not alone. Some of you today are likely cringing at some of what I’ve been telling you. I’m sorry about that. I don’t know why ministers have in the past been so afraid of their congregations that they think they can’t handle the truth. Frankly, I think THAT is insulting!

I recently read again one of John Spong’s books, its called A New Christianity for a New World. Right away I recognized myself in his writing. He asks: so why am I still here?

I wonder if some of you have asked that question too.

Here is his answer, and I hope it will help you too.

We cannot just tilt at the windmills of antiquity, without offering something new, something fresh, something helpful for our time. **Reconstruct, not Deconstruct.**

The fact that God still seems to care for the church should give us pause, not comfort.

God is ALWAYS offering something new, fresh and exciting.

As times change, so does our understanding of God.

Now, in our time, we know that The Creator is generative, proactive, and completely conscious of us, and we live INSIDE this amazing being in some mysterious way.

It’s OUR job, as church, to figure out how what that means now, in OUR world.

It’s our job to figure out how God is creating the conditions that will bring peace and joy and hope and love to bear in our lives and in our world.

It’s our job to , as Spong says: develop new visions, propose new models, and chart new solutions.

I get excited when I think about the future of humanity because I think we all have a part to play in it.

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That gives me hope for the next generations who will come after us.

And it’s why I still adore Mary the mother of Jesus, and welcome her into the nativity story as a key player. Not as virgin.

But as a scared young woman who does not know what is happening to her. I think that pretty much describes the state of our earth these days. If that image works for you, consider this: we (the world today) are also pregnant with the future of the earth. We too are giving birth to a new time, a new age, a new story of God, who wants to be born in us and through us.

It may take a couple more generations for the church to accept this, but until we bring back into the fold all the female aspects of God, and understand how pervasive the patriarchal system has been in the influence of our thinking, we will never have a balanced view of the world. Until we accept that the feminine aspect of God is just another part of the divine creative energy, and not something to be feared or held up as the impossible ideal, or subjugated through culture and history, then we’ll never be able to accept that our religion is truly **part of our life. If it can’t be about ALL of life, then it will be rendered useless by the generations that follow us.**

The truth is, we are and always have been, pregnant with possibility. We are each and ALL being called to give birth to the living “Child” of God.

But, our world is STILL waiting for the time to come when our children will be born in peace, and live their lives with joy and love.

Our world is STILL waiting for us to love it as we love ourselves, as Jesus taught, such that our adoration of the environment will equal our adoration of God.

Our world is STILL waiting for all of humanity to create the conditions, to become conscious enough to accept the conditions, in which God will be known IN us as much as OUTSIDE of us. Because once we understand that God’s spirit lives IN us, and take our responsibility for the future seriously, we will all know ourselves (women and men) as handmaidens of the Lord.

And then shall come to pass Mary’s words: OUR souls doth MAGNIFY the Lord.

May it be so!