Affirming our Faith through the Apostles' Creed

Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary

Text: Luke 1:26-38 -- In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 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, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 And 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. 36 And 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And 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.

Introduction: The phrase *"**conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary**"* speaks of the incarnation of Christ. This is the belief that **Jesus is the Son of God who became a human being born of a virgin in the tiny village of Bethlehem some two thousand years ago**. Theologians refer to Him as the unique God/Man … **undiminished deity and perfect humanity united in one Person for the rest of eternity**. This important teaching of the Christian church is clearly taught in the Bible and has been universally believed by Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians alike, at least until the last 150 years. That's when … through the rise of liberal Christianity … some theologians began to **call the virgin birth into question**. It didn't bother them, however, because in their minds their faith didn't hinge on it anyway. This, of course, begs the question for us this morning, "**Should the Incarnation of Christ matter to Christians**?" In his book, ***Who Is This Man?*** **John Ortberg** talks about the impact upon our world of the Son of God becoming a living, breathing human being. ***He writes***: In some ways, our biggest challenge in gauging Jesus' influence is that ***we take for granted the ways in which our world has been shaped by him***. **For instance** … **children would be thought of differently because of Jesus**. ***Historian O. M. Bakke*** wrote a study called "**When Children Became People: the Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity"** in which he noted that in the ancient world, children usually didn't get named until the eighth day or so. Up until then, there was a chance that the infant would be killed or left to die of exposure — particularly if it was deformed or … female. This custom changed because of … (Christians) who remembered that they were followers of a man (Jesus) who said, "**Let the little children come to me**." **In addition, though Jesus never married, his treatment of women led to the formation of a community that was so congenial to women that they would flock to it in record numbers. Third** … **He never held an office or led an army … and yet the movement Jesus started would eventually mean the end of emperor worship, (would) be cited in documents like *the Magna Carta.* It would begin a tradition of common law and limited government, and undermine the power of the state rather than reinforce it as other religions in the empire had done**. Historians have said of His movement that language such as, "**We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,**" entered history as a direct result. **Fourth** … **the Roman Empire into which Jesus was born could be splendid but also cruel,**

especially for the malformed and diseased and enslaved. This one teacher had said, *"Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me*." And an idea slowly emerged that **the suffering of every single individual human being matters and that those who are able to help ought to do so**. Hospitals and relief efforts of all kinds emerged from this movement. Today these places often carry names that remind us of Him and His teachings (*Mercy Hospital, Holy Cross and Holy Redeemer, etc*). **Fifth** … **Humility, which was *scorned* in the ancient world, became enshrined in a cross and was eventually *championed as a virtue***. **Sixth** … **Enemies, who were thought to be worthy of vengeance (*it was often said, "help your friends and punish your enemies*"), came to be seen as worthy of love**. *(That's when)* ***forgiveness*** moved from weakness to an act of moral beauty. And **Seventh**, we know that even in death, Jesus' influence is hard to escape. **The practice of burial in graveyards or cemeteries was taken from his followers … It expressed the hope of resurrection**.

When we consider some of the ways the virgin birth as altered our ways of living, it's clear that it matters more than a few liberal theologians think! This morning, as we continue in our series, **Affirming our Faith through the Apostles' Creed**, we're going to look at the meaning, the occasion, and the significance of the virgin birth. But before we begin, let's consider four arguments espoused by liberal Christians as to **why the incarnation should be rejected**.

The Rejection of the Virgin Birth. ***What are the arguments against it***?

- **An argument from Science**. According to more than a few scientists, the very notion of a virgin birth is ***biologically impossible***. A woman's egg must be fertilized by a man's seed for a life to be conceived. There is no other way. However, this is very bad science. You see, at best science can only deal with probabilities, not possibilities. **A scientist can only say that something is highly unlikely. He can *never* say that any event is impossible because there is no way to prove that hypothesis**. If a scientific experiment fails one million out of one million times, who's to say that it must fail the next time? We, Christians, are quick to admit that Jesus' virgin birth is an incredibly rare event that has only happened once, but that doesn't mean it is beyond the realm of possibility.
- **An argument from Scripture**. The Bible doesn't teach a virgin birth. The word for ***virgin*** can mean a young girl, not a woman who has never been intimate with a man. This is the way some theologians say it is used in **Luke 1:26 – In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a *virgin* betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph and Isaiah 7:14 – the virgin will be with child and give birth to a son**. But the context here in **Luke 1** tells us that Mary used the word to refer to herself as one who had never had sexual relations with a man (*After Gabriel announced that she would bear the Christ, she asked*, "**How can this be since I am a virgin**?"). There is no other way to interpret her words that makes sense of her comment.
- **An argument from Silence**. The notion that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary is only found in two places in the Word of God (**Matthew 1** and **Luke 1**). If such a miracle happened, why isn't it mentioned elsewhere? A more important question is, "**How many times does God have to say something before it is believable**?" After all, **God is not a man that He should lie** (**Numbers 13:19**). If we apply the principle of frequency to other matters in the Bible we would be without the ascension (*only recorded by Luke*) and many other important stories concerning His life and ministry.
- **An argument from Sameness**. The story of the virgin birth parallels other ancient myths that influenced the writers of the New Testament. **This breaks down when we consider that just because something happened before another event, does not mean that the two *must* be linked**.

Besides … to the ancient Greeks and Romans, it was unimportant whether miracles actually took place or not. They were simply a part of the story. The Hebrews, however, believed that Yahweh is the creator and Lord of history, so they were driven to get every detail right in the historical record.

The Meaning of the Virgin Birth. ***What does it tell us***?

- **Jesus was born because God willed it**. No one expected the Son of God to come to earth as a man. It came as a surprise to nearly everyone including **Joseph** who assumed the worst about Mary until he heard from the angel. **Mary, herself,** was shocked and mystified by Gabriel's words. Had **the Jews** known, they would have come running as soon as the baby was born. **His birth was not anticipated and certainly not contrived**. It happened merely because God willed it to at the right time in history.
- **Jesus did not have a human father.** His father was from heaven. Jesus was the adopted son of Joseph of Nazareth. That's why **Luke 3:23 says, "Jesus, when He began His ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son … as was supposed … of Joseph.**"
- **Jesus did have a human mother**. Some people believe that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was **immaculately conceived** so that she was without sin, but the Bible doesn't teach that. ***Mary was just as human as you and m***e. She inherited the same sinful nature that all of us have. Consider the words of her prayer in Luke 1, "**My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior – Luke 1:47**." The fact that God chose her as the mother of the Christ-child was an act of grace she did not earn or deserve. While Mary is a role model of "faith" for us to follow, she is also just like the rest of us.
- **Jesus is 'the holy One.'** This is what He's called in **Luke 1:35 – the holy child shall be called the Son of God (NASB)**. It tells us that Jesus came into the world **untainted by sin**. He had nothing in Him that was displeasing to His father. **IN SUMMARY** … **the virgin birth tells us that the Lord was born of God (He made it happen), did not have an earthly father, had an earthly mother and was and is the "Holy One" of God**.

  Look … we all know a name tells us a lot about someone (Jesus is Immanuel, the Great I AM, the Son of God, the Holy One). This week, I heard the story of a woman who was pregnant with twins, and shortly before they were due, she had an accident and went into a coma. Her husband was out of the country and unable to be reached. While in the coma, she gave birth to her two children, and it just so happened that the only person around to name them was her not-so-bright brother. When the new mother came out of her coma a day after her delivery to discover she had given birth and that her brother had named the twins, she became very worried. She was sure he had named them something absurd or weird. When she saw her brother, she asked him about the twins. He said, "***The first one was a girl***." "**Oh**, ***I'm sooo happy***" said the mother: "***Tell me, what did you name her***?" Her brother responded, "***Denise***!" Relieved the woman said, "**W*ow, that's not bad! What about the second one***?" "***The second one was a boy***!" With a little more confidence the woman asked, "***And what did you name him***?" Her brother replied, "***Denephew***." Jesus was called the Holy One or Holy Child of God. That's really saying something.

The Occasion of the Virgin Birth. ***What happened when the Holy Spirit conceived the human life of Jesus within Mary's womb***?

- **What we do know**. It was a miracle that fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. ***God became a man without ceasing to be God***. **Isaiah 7:14 – The Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel** (God with Us). **We also know**

this: The Bible says **the power of the most High overshadowed Mary so that the One born in her was the Son of God**. The word "**overshadow**" suggests ***God's intimate and personal presence completely surrounded Mary in the same way His presence in the cloud covered the Tabernacle in the Old Testament so that the Israelites knew He was there***.

- **What we don't know**. We don't know the details of how it happened. We just know that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the Most High overshadowed her. The result was that she was carrying a child. **This will likely remain a mystery to us for the rest of eternity, though it is certainly God's prerogative to explain how He did it when we're with Him in heaven**. The amazing thing to consider is that ***Mary was a virgin before the incarnation and after it***, that is until she had sexual relations with Joseph resulting in the birth of her other children (**Mark 3:32; 6:3**). **Now that we've talked about the meaning and occasion of the virgin birth, let's look at its significance**.

The Significance of the Virgin Birth. ***Why does it matter***?

- **It confirms that the Bible can be trusted**. To believe the virgin birth is to agree with the testimony of the Scriptures. Now this is fundamental to every other Christian doctrine because **we base our beliefs on the Bible**. So, if you don't believe God's Word is completely true, then you have the problem of trying to pick and choose what is worthy of your faith and trust and what is not. **And the much larger issue is that your choice will always be restricted by the limits of human reason, which is flawed at best**. Listen … the Bible doesn't present the life of Christ and then say, "**Pick your miracle**." ***Either you accept them all or you reject them all***.
- **It confirms that Jesus is both human and divine**. Again … this also matters a lot. No man could save us from our sins because each of us has to die for our own (**Romans 3:23 – for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**; **Romans 6:23 – for the wages of sin is death**). As the Son of God in heaven, Jesus couldn't save us either. He had to become one of us (human) to redeem us (**Hebrews 2:14 –Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil**). Thus, the necessity of the incarnation … undiminished deity and perfect humanity in one person.
- **It confirms that salvation is possible**. Jesus (*His name means the Lord is salvation*) died as our substitute so that through personal faith in Him we might have life that never ends (**1 John 5:11-12 – And the witness is this … God has given us eternal life … and this life is in His Son … He who has the Son has the life … He who does not have the Son … does not have life**). If you believe the testimony of God's Word concerning His Son, if you have put your faith in Jesus to be Your Savior and Lord, then you have new life in Him.

Three questions to consider …

- **Do you believe God's Word is true**? Can you read it with confidence knowing that is an accurate account that details God's work in the universe and in our world and most importantly through the incarnation of His Son?
- **Do you believe Jesus is both God and Man**? How two natures could combine in one person remains a mystery in many ways to us, but it did happen and that means He truly is God with Us (Immanuel).
- **Do you believe that He died on the cross for you**? He didn't come just to check out what was happening here in the world. The truth is He knew all along that we would make a mess of everything, bringing the wrath of Holy God upon us. **Jesus didn't come seeking information, but offering salvation by rescuing us from eternal separation from God in the fiery pit of Hell**.

Conclusion: It was the great preacher **Charles Spurgeon** who referred to Jesus who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary as "***infinite, and an infant***." ***Could there be two forms of existence that stand in greater contradiction than these***? **The first** means that Jesus is the eternal Son of God; **the second** is that as a human being, He had a beginning in a manger in Bethlehem. **Why would He deliberately take on the constraints of human flesh when He had always been without limits?** ***Here's the answer to that question from one man's perspective***: Being from the South, **David Slaigle** loves ribs. He remembered hearing about this particular restaurant that had amazing ribs, and a bunch of his friends and David drove 50 minutes to get there. The place was packed, and the food was great. It was "***all-you-can-eat rib night***," and rib bones were piling up as fast as the line to get in. Eating ribs is a messy business. Barbecue sauce gets on your face, fingers, and clothes; dirty napkins pile up next to half-eaten bowls of baked beans and coleslaw. When his crew had eaten all they could eat, they paid their tab and waddled out to the car. That's when he reached into his pocket for his keys and came up with nothing but lint. Starting to panic, he looked through the window at the ignition. He was hoping that he had locked his keys in the car because, in the back of his mind, a more disgusting possibility was taking shape. **When he saw that the ignition was empty, he knew exactly where his keys were--the keys to his car, his house, and his office**. **Only seconds earlier, those precious keys had slid right off his tray and followed a half-eaten corn cob and several bones to the bottom of a trash can**. He had thrown away his keys on all-you-can-eat rib night. It was a long walk home, and his friends certainly weren't going to do his dirty work for him, so he dove in. Slaigle fished through bones, beans, barbecue, corn, cake, coleslaw, and a host of saliva-soaked napkins. A shiny layer of trashcan slime had coated his arms before he finally grasped hold of those precious keys. **As we meditate on the Incarnation this morning, I think about our dumpster-diving God**. I mean no disrespect by calling him that. On the contrary, I have a soaring adoration for the infinite God who left a pristine, sinless heaven to search through the filth and rubbish of this fallen world for something precious to him—you and me. That's what the incarnation is all about. NOW JOIN ME AND LET'S DECLARE WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST BY RECITING TOGETHER THE APOSTLES' CREED.

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I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ His only Son, Our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into Hades; The third day He rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.