

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fourth Sunday of Advent • December 22, 2019

Isaiah 7:10-16 • Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 • Romans 1:1-7 • Matthew 1:18-25

Every year around Christmas and Easter, New York *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof publishes a column where he interviews a religious leader about their faith. Usually, the results are pleasant, if somewhat unremarkable. Last Easter's was different. Kristof interviewed Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City.¹ Playing the role of friendly skeptic, most of Kristof's questions focused on the parts of Christian doctrine he finds hardest to understand: the resurrection and the virgin birth. When asked whether she believed in the virgin birth, Jones responded, "I find the virgin birth a bizarre claim. It has nothing to do with Jesus' message."

The fact that Jones doesn't believe in virgin birth is less interesting to me than people's responses to the interview, which ranged from "Serene Jones is a heretic who should be burned at the stake" to "Anyone who doesn't agree with Serene Jones is some kind of Neanderthal." If Jones had said she didn't believe in the "one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic church," I doubt many people would have cared. But the virgin birth gets our hackles up. We aren't quite sure what to do with it. It feels hard to believe. But it also seems too important to just edit out of the creeds. Part of our problem is that we often start in the wrong place. And we think the virgin birth is trying to do something that it's not.

One way we often misread the virgin birth is by making it all about prophecies from the Hebrew Bible. In today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet proclaims that a "young woman" will have a child. "Young woman" comes from the Hebrew word *almah*, which many early editors translated as "virgin." Whether that's a good translation is up for debate and beyond my knowledge of Hebrew. (Like most things.) But you could think that the virgin birth is just a way for Matthew to connect Jesus to this ancient prophecy. Isaiah said this child would be born of a virgin, and, as it just so happens, Jesus was also born of a virgin. So Jesus must be the one Isaiah was talking about. But Isaiah also says that the one called Immanuel would love to eat curds and honey. If all Matthew was doing was checking off old prophecies, he would have mentioned that Jesus loved to eat curds and honey like Isaiah said he would, and isn't that just an interesting coincidence. But he doesn't.

Another more common and more harmful way we misread the virgin birth is by trying to make it about sin and sex.² This is wrong, but there's a good reason why people fall into this trap. In the fourth century, St. Augustine, who is the most important theologian of the first thousand years of the church, was trying to figure out his doctrine of original sin. And he thought, *Well, if original sin is universal, if everyone has it, then it must be because of some universal experience.* And at the time Augustine was alive, the common experience everyone had was that they were the product of sex. And so Augustine figured that the sex somehow passes sin onto the next generation. What Augustine did that was so influential, for better or worse (probably worse), was he took the idea that sin was passed

¹ Nicholas Kristof, "Reverend, You Say the Virgin Birth is a 'Bizarre Claim,'" *New York Times*, April 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/20/opinion/sunday/christian-easter-serene-jones.html>

² This seems to be what Jones is worried about. "I find the virgin birth a bizarre claim. It has nothing to do with Jesus' message. The virgin birth only becomes important if you have a theology in which sexuality is considered sinful. It also promotes this notion that the pure, untouched female body is the best body, and that idea has led to centuries of oppressing women."

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through sex and combined it with Matthew's claim that Jesus was born of a virgin.³ And he said that Jesus had to have been born of a virgin so that Jesus would be born without sin.⁴

But it's important to remember that Matthew was writing his gospel centuries before this Augustine was writing about sex and original sin. This is not anywhere in his worldview. So if it's not about Jesus being sinless and if it's not just about checking a box to fulfill some prophecy from Isaiah, why include it? What is Matthew trying to do? You could imagine having a gospel with no virgin birth at all. St. Mark did. Mark doesn't even have any birth at all. Jesus just shows up one day as a thirty-something year old. And his gospel seems good enough. So why did Matthew include the virgin birth?

For Matthew, the virgin birth is not a statement about sex or sin or prophecies. It's a statement about creation. It helps to remember here that Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospel writers. And the heart of both the Hebrew Bible's creation stories, the stories Matthew and his community knew well, is a claim that God creates not out of compulsion or out of fear or out of pressure. God isn't responding to something when God begins creating. Creation is a gift. God creates out of freedom.

That's very different than you and me. Because we don't live in freedom. We live in a world of cause and effect. We spend most of our days reacting to things other people have done or that we think they might do. We do things out of compulsion. Out of duty. Out of need. When we look at the world and try to make decisions about what it means to live faithfully and responsibly, we're never looking at all the options. The range of choices we have is always constrained by the people who have come before us and by those around us. And because those effects never go away, sometimes they even compound over time, we get stuck in cycles that repeat over and over.

Sometimes those cycles are personal ones. We have family systems and dynamics where the same events play out again and again. Traumatic events in our families can have massive impacts on our lives even if they happened before we were born. Sometimes those cycles are civic ones. To take an obvious example, if you fund schools with property taxes, don't be surprised when the wealthier neighborhoods have better schools that give wealthy kids resources to get the kind of jobs where they can afford homes in wealthy neighborhoods.⁵ So on and so on. And sometimes those cycles are global. Sarah Peck, who worked in the US Embassy in Kabul during the Obama administration, recently gave an interview about the new documents from the War in Afghanistan that came out earlier this month.⁶ And one of the things she talked about was how her office tolerated some amount of corruption to provide security to keep Afghan officials safe. But the more corruption they allowed, the more resentful and restless the local population became and the more security they needed. And eventually the cycle just spiraled out of control. In our families, in our communities, in the world, we are never really making the first move. We are always responding to the world we've inherited.

The virgin birth is Matthew's way of showing us that God is not constrained by those same cycles that we are. The birth of Jesus shows that God is capable of breaking through the cycles that we replay over and over and over again. And bringing something new into being where there seems to be no possibility at all.

³ Mary became pregnant "not by conjugal intercourse, but by faith—lust being utterly absent—so that that which was born from the root of the first man might derive only the origin of race, not also of guilt."

⁴ The Roman Catholic doctrine of the immaculate conception, that Mary was conceived without sin, does have some Augustinian roots.

⁵ "Why America's Schools Have A Money Problem," *Morning Edition*, April 18, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/04/18/474256366/why-americas-schools-have-a-money-problem>.

⁶ "US Spending in Afghanistan Fueled Rampant Corruption, Reports Say," *The World*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-12-11/us-spending-afghanistan-fueled-rampant-corruption-reports-says>

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Think back to that first creation story from the Hebrew Bible for a minute. God creates all that is in six days and then rests on the seventh. So often we read that and think it's the end of the story. Creation is over, got it wrapped up with a day to spare, and now we're on to other things. We'll check back in if things start to go downhill. No, Matthew says something else. Matthew and Matthew's community know that on day eight, God gets back to creating. God creates faith in Abraham and Sarah. God creates a people out of a group of slaves in Egypt. God creates a covenant. God creates a prophetic word to liberate the people from their indifference. And then God creates a human who embodies the entirety of the divine life. And that act of new creation is just like the first one. Not out of force. Not out of compulsion. But out of freedom, both God's and Mary's. The incarnation is not some patch that gets dropped off to fix a bug in the system. It's the pressure of God to be in our lives breaking through in a radically new and unexpected way.

That's why the symbolism of Christians gathering for worship on Sundays became so important. The day after the Sabbath was the eighth day. And on the eighth day, God keeps on creating. Instead of just going back through the same old cycles, going back to day one, God brings us into a new reality. That's why many early Christians designed baptismal fonts with eight sides on them. When we live out the promises of our baptisms, God calls us out of the same cycles we get stuck in over and over.

That's what the virgin birth is all about. It's not about sin. It's not about sex. It's not about prophecies. It's about how God liberates us from the old cycles we replay over and over and brings us into eternal life. We can never start over. But we can always start anew.

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