

**SERMON- Advent 4 (A)**  
**Charles R. Cowherd**

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

**St. Timothy's (Herndon)**  
**December 18, 2022**

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

**OPENING:**

In last week's sermon I told a story about teenagers from my teaching career, and how they were... sometimes... immature.

After giving that sermon at the 10 o'clock service, I asked one of our teenagers what he thought about it and he said: "Well... actually... I was not listening.. I am too immature."

Touché! (And he said that... lovingly.)

This week I told our Gospel story to our Preschool. All of them came upstairs and I showed them everything that goes in the manger, the creche, with Mary and Joseph and the sheep.

Afterwards, I asked Allyson Showalter, the Preschool Director, how I did. She said "you did great but... you kinda assumed they knew too much, kids in our culture today don't know anything about the Nativity Story."

Well, you all are neither preschoolers or teenagers and one of the liberties you get when you are giving a sermon ONLY at 8 AM (because our 10 AM we are doing the Advent/ Christmas Hymn Festival... which you should come back to!) is that you get to preach to the choir, the die-hards... and with no livestream.

And that's a good thing for a lesson like this that can get... a little PG-13 and maybe even a little R-rated.

So here goes:

**REPLY**

First, another story about telling this story, at my old church, I was once talking about this lesson to a group of teenagers at Youth Group.

And at some point, one teenager, a young woman, said:

"You guys should know that this story is actually from Greek mythology where Zeus or some god would just come down and have sex with a woman against their will and that's what this is."

Eek.... I am not quite sure what I said next. But this is what I should have said:

Those Greek myths *did* feature rape. That is NOT what is happening here.

This story is consensual, the Gospels make that plain,

AND it's also actually not "sexual."

Jesus' conception is an act of creation by the Holy Spirit. It models that other act of creation, how "in the beginning", in the book of Genesis, the Spirit moves over the waters and participates in the creation of this world.<sup>1</sup>

This is an act of New Creation, Jesus: the last Man; as that was God's creation of the world and of Adam, the First Man.

How do we know that it's that versus what that young teenager said?

First step, you just read the story: that's what Matthew says, the text does not imply anything of a sexual nature, nor does it imply anything against anyone's will.

Second, it helps to have some context, especially knowing that in the Greco-Roman world, bodies were cheap, particularly women's bodies, and were fit to be discarded at the whims of the powerful.

In the Judeo-Christian worldview, though, bodies had value, sex had value and it means something. It's to be cherished as we are bearers of the image of God.

Now you can choose to read it however you want to, and we should listen to our teenagers and what they hear when they read this story.

A good question is: *why* would she *think* that?

You can chalk it up to hormonally inclined teenagers, who might be just as sex-crazed as Greek gods were.

But really it's a reflection of our culture....

of the Secular world which is just as focused on sex, where everything must be explained in those terms.

and of the Church, meanwhile, tends to not do much better, often sex-focused in the opposite direction, coming up with doctrines of perpetual virginity, the immaculate conception, etc.

Now all of these readings are, don't get me wrong, pretty interesting but they ultimately say more about ourselves than they do about the story or about what God is up to.

## **ORIGIN STORY:**

In the end, it is extremely hard to know, in terms of historical fact, what "actually" happened here.

If only there had been court-appointed stenographers in Bethlehem or Nazareth, but there weren't.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Brown *Birth of the Messiah* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), 530-531.

We need to know, we need paternity tests and testimonies and alibis.

That's our modern way of determining the truth.

But that's not how Matthew and the ancient world were coming to grips with it. Because you are 8 o'clockers, I can tell you that, whether or not Jesus was born in a manger is not "the Gospel." Whether it was Bethlehem or Nazareth, or angels or shepherds, or they were engaged or married. None of that is "the Gospel truth."

The Gospel is: "Christ is Risen, Christ will come again."

The Gospel proclamation occurs at the Resurrection, Matthew started from there and had to work backwards from that point.

So Matthew first told the story of Christ's death and the build-up, then he went backwards and thought about his ministry:

talked about his healings, then his teachings, then his Baptism, finally they struggled with this idea: then.... Well how was Jesus born?

I am not saying they made it up, I am saying that they did not understand it because how could you while it was happening.

So they took the oral tradition about Mary and Joseph not being married which, by the way, just had to have been true, because why make it up? All it does is cloud the story and open Christianity up to attack.

Then Matthew, in particular, was immersed in the deep pattern of God providing salvation where there is not, of women in the Old Testament and overcoming all sorts of obstacles. They took prophecies from the Old Testament and apply to the new reality and identity of Jesus Christ.

So Matthew tells the story, backwards, knowing what he knows about the Risen Christ first, and using that to inform how Jesus' conception took place. So the story is a little messy, and it gets told differently between Matthew and Luke, and it does not get told in Mark and John, because they are trying to make sense of the story backwards.

## **STORY**

I keep using the word "Story"—that was a story, the Gospel was a story, I told the preschool kids the "story".... When you use the word "Story"—of course you wonder if it's true. In the sense that we know something to be true in our world today.

We don't tell stories through miracles anymore, but rather through movies and memes and TV Shows. If this were 10 o'clock, I would have to compare Jesus'

origin story to a Comic Book about Superman or Batman. But since this is 8 o'clock, I will use another medium: The Western.

That time-honored genre that teaches us who we are and where we came from. One of the most famous in our culture is LONESOME DOVE, the incredible novel by Larry McMurtry and later TV miniseries. A key plot point is the parentage of Newt, the young cowboy hand. His mother was a prostitute and they don't know who was the father. The whole story is about Newt coming of age and becoming a man, and discovering who he is while, sadly, none of the characters will ever claim him as their son. At the end of the movie, Newt utters the heart-breaking line, when someone asks him if he knows who his father is: "I ain't kin to no one in this world." He is alone, unconnected, he is the "Lonesome Dove" of the story, with no birthright, no family, no sense of belonging.

## **CONCLUSION**

We know that that's not actually true, that that's never true, that as members of the Body of Christ that we are all connected, we all have a place and have value. And that leads us Back to the Gospel story, and back to the parentage of Jesus Christ.

Notice what Joseph does at the end of the story, he names the child, he is not a foster parent or adoptive father.

He is the legal parent, in a culture where that meant something. The Hebrew word for "to say" and "to create" are the same thing, in fact. He named this child, just as the Holy Spirit created him.

Matthew, meanwhile calls Jesus the Son of David, Son of God. He calls him Emmanuel. Luke will add a lot more names to that number.

These names and titles and genealogies come spilling out of the collective Christian memory and through history and tradition and creed. No one can quite say exactly who Jesus is, but no one can quit telling his story.

**AMEN**