

Don't Throw Out the Baby Jesus With the Virgin Mary's Bathwater
Christmas Eve, 2006, at St. John's United Church
Rev. Linda Yates

People come into our lives or sometimes, as in when we are born or adopted, we can be considered to have come into other's lives. Usually, the importance of the people whose lives we share only become gradually apparent to us as we learn more and more about the circumstances of their lives, the historic importance of the events surrounding their living. The influence of the people whose lives we share also becomes more evident as we learn more and more about ourselves, as life makes its marks upon us, good or bad.

My grandmother Margaret Murray was a woman who was conceived "out of wedlock" as used to be said, during the First World War in England. Pregnant her mother was shipped off to what the English considered the wilds of Canada, (Toronto), in shame. She was given to "maiden" aunts to raise and then, as a child was put into service, never seeing her own mother except to pass over her wages. AT the age of 18, she married an abusive alcoholic, spending their wedding night, sleeping on a park bench. And then things got worse. What is remarkable to me as I hear more and more from my aging uncles and my mother about the circumstances of her life is how she managed to successfully raise eight children in poverty with grace, good humour and an incredible love. As I age, it seems nothing short of miraculous to me.

As Carl and I have parented our own children over the years, particularly as they became teenagers and young adults, I look at my parents in a whole new light. I'm sure the same phenomenon has happened to many of you as well.

As Mark Twain so famously noted, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."

It all has to do with perspective, particularly the interweaving of both memory and context. So many of the important insights and revelations of life have to do with hindsight; the gathering of all of the different strands of experience and knowledge and then weaving them into coherent understanding.

This does not just happen to individuals; it also happens to communities. So it was with the early church and the person of Jesus Christ. Here was a man who was so centered in the presence of God, so grounded in the Divine Energy, so focused on the really important matters of existence on earth that everything changed in his presence. People were healed and made whole. Powers and principalities of inequity and injustice were challenged. New communities of discipleship and radical change sprang up wherever he had gone. This man Jesus was so connected to the sheer power and strength of Self giving Divine Love that the very fabric of time and space seemed to be altered wherever he went and whenever he was around. After he physically left this earth and those communities, those alterations continued.

So, who was this man, Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph the carpenter? This became the question of the early church. It became clear that the followers of Jesus, those friends, relatives and entire communities whose lives he had changed and challenged for the better, came to recognized him as the long

promised Messiah, God's chosen Child. As they looked back over his life they had shared with him and as all the stories from those whose lives he had touched came to be shared, the meaning and the influence of this man, God's Beloved Child, came into clearer focus.

The letters of Paul, those books at the end of the bible are the earliest documents we have arising from these earliest of Christian communities. Paul would have hung around with people who were contemporaries of Jesus. The writings of Paul are full of the wonder, the awe, and the life changing power of taking in the message of Jesus the Christ, first born from the dead in the Resurrection. Interestingly however there is no mention of the virgin birth.

The gospel of Mark is our earliest gospel, from about 65 A.D. There is lots of good news in Mark about the power of the Divine so resplendent in the person of Jesus Christ. There is lots of affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah, the beloved of God. There are many stories of deeds of power in Mark. Of course, there are also those subversive teachings of Jesus in Mark, things like the first being last and the last being first in the Kingdom of God. There are lots of lives and communities transformed after exposure to Jesus in Mark. But in Mark, our earliest gospel, you will find no mention of the virgin birth.

The virgin birth is a doctrine that arose out of the late first century. Having a virgin birth was not really a big deal in the ancient world. Many of the Caesars were said to have had virgin births. Pythagoras, one of the fathers of mathematics was said to have had a virgin birth. In those days, anyone who was considered to be important would be required to have an unusual birth story. There would have been an assumption in the early church community, that Jesus would have had an unusual birth. This is not a new concept to ancient Jewish communities. All throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) the birth of an important person is signaled by an unusual birth. The patriarch Isaac and the prophet Samuel are two such examples. Often, the mother of such a person is declared to be barren or is very old or both. Then she conceives by the grace of God. Those who wrote about Jesus' birth were signaling that God was doing something different. No aged or barren women for Jesus' Mom!

The writer of the gospel of Matthew, the first time we read about Jesus' birth, looks through his bible, (the Hebrew Scriptures), and finds what he believes to be a prediction about the birth of Jesus. The passage, well known to Jewish communities, says that a young woman will bear the Messiah, (Isaiah 7:14). Note that the passage actually refers to a "young girl" but Matthew misquotes it as "a virgin." Scholars believe that either he had a bad copy of the Isaiah or that his Hebrew was not up to snuff. Or perhaps the writer of Matthew just *wanted* to see what he later wrote down. We will never know. Thus, our account of the virgin birth story in Matthew begins.

Some of you are no doubt thinking "Why is she talking about this on Christmas Eve of all nights?!" I guess the short answer is because I feel God is calling me to. Why? Because over my years in ministry many people have said to me something to the effect of "Linda, I would like to believe in Jesus, but I can't swallow the virgin birth." I always think at such times: Wow, they are throwing out the whole works; they ignore the whole message, *based on the least important aspect of the story.*"

It is time in our churches for an intelligent faith, an adult faith, an unblind faith, a faith that intersects with our lives today, a faith that will change the world. Marcus Borg in his book The Heart of Christianity, states:

I have been told that the German novelist Thomas Mann defined a myth ...as “a story about the way things never were, but always are.” So is a myth true? Literally true, no. Really true? Yes.

And: A Catholic priest once said in a sermon, “the Bible is true, and some of it happened.” To make this point obvious: The truth of the Bible is not dependent on its historical factuality.”

The same point is made by a Native American storyteller as he begins telling his tribe’s story of Creation: “Now I don’t know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true.”

It may be difficult for us to realize that for the ancient community who first recorded the story of Jesus’ birth, the virgin part of it would have been the least important. It would have been in the “of course-so what” category. It is ironic that in this scientific-method obsessed culture the virgin birth tends to become the salient focus for many of us in terms of the efficacy of the entire gospel. This would be surprising for the early church. What was important to those first witnesses was that the message and the life of the man Jesus had so transformed the world that the Roman Empire would never, could never be the same – and never was the same. What was important to them was that God had so obviously come into the world in the person of Jesus Christ that our time and our space and all of our lives have been forever altered and opened up to new possibilities. That was the important piece.

You know, we need not throw the baby Jesus out with the Virgins’ bath water. For many, however, it is an attractive thought. For some, in rejecting the more minor details of the story, permission is then self-given to not take in *any* of the gospel’s message. When we do that, we don’t have to be altered by Christ’s vision, the connection to God that happens when we open our hearts to the power of the whole story. Being open to the whole story requires change; hard change, internal change, change that might affect your bottom line and your pocket book. Taking in the message of Jesus Christ, the work of the Prince of Peace means learning to love your neighbour as you love yourself. It means learning to care and advocate for the poor, the downtrodden, the disadvantage and those left behind. It means learning to pray for and to truly care about the welfare of your enemies. It means challenging political and economic powers to do the right thing. It means learning to pray. It is a lot of work, being a follower of this Jesus Christ, the man whose birthday we celebrate tonight. It is demanding to be a follower of Jesus. But when it is done faithfully and lovingly, (never perfectly mind you, that is not expected), lives are transformed and power is experienced in growing closer to God. When it is done faithfully and lovingly, relationships are restored and time and space are altered again and again.

This is the good news that the shepherds spoke of so long ago. Shepherds were the lowest of the low in terms of hierarchy of class and workers in ancient times. However, it was to them that God sent angels to announce the birth of

Jesus. It was not to the aristocracy or the politically important or to the priests. God sent God's most holy messengers to the shepherds. Their response after they checked out the baby Jesus? They returned to the fields and to their lives but with glory and praise on the lips, their lives changed forever.

Tonight, that is what we do. We sing. We bless. We break bread. We share. We pray. We talk. We give. We are in some small and large ways transformed by the very fact that we are here in this holy place. We are most transformed though by the fact that we are doing it here together in the name of Jesus Christ. We glorify God and we give thanks and praise that almost 2000 years later, we are still sharing the stories gathered together by that early Christian community. Most of all we give thanks and praise that the transforming power of God in Christ is still at work in the world. How now, will you let that power be at work in you as you return to your fields and your lives?

Sources Used:

Boadt, Lawrence, Reading the Old Testament, Paulist Press, New York, 1984

Borg, Marcus, The Heart of Christianity, HarperSanFrancisco; Reprint edition, 2004

Kee, Howard, ed., Christianity: A Social and Cultural History, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1991

Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV), Oxford University Press, USA; 3rd edition (January 25, 2001)

Perkins, Pheme, Reading the New Testament, Paulist Press, New York, 1988