

THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF FAITH

Scriptures: Holy Spirit in Matthew; Acts 1:6-8

All this year we have been studying the Gospel of Matthew in our church services. So for Pentecost I thought it appropriate to look at the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of Matthew. Take out the blue insert in the bulletin labeled “The Holy Spirit in Matthew.” On this insert I have listed every reference in the Gospel of Matthew to the Holy Spirit. Take a look at the first one: Matthew 1:18-20.

(Read Matthew 1:18-20)

Have you ever wondered why Matthew’s gospel makes such a special point that Jesus was conceived *from the Holy Spirit*? Matthew could have said the child is conceived by God and still made the point that Jesus is God’s Son. But Matthew stresses that Jesus’ conception is the work of the Holy Spirit. Why?

I discovered the answer to this in a commentary on Matthew written by one of my former teachers at Whitworth University: Dale Bruner. In these three verses Matthew not only wants to tell us something about Jesus, namely that he is God’s Son, but also something about the Holy Spirit. Dale Bruner writes,

The Holy Spirit is the one who brings Jesus to birth in persons, the one who makes Jesus alive in human life, who makes Jesus historical and real. ... When Jesus Christ comes to anyone in history, even in his first coming to Mary, it is always the result of the work of the Holy Spirit, not of human preparation or enterprise. Every conversion is a virgin birth” (pp. 20-21).

That is what Matthew wants us to know about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the agent of bringing Jesus into our lives and world, even today. I can no more take credit for any of you here believing in Jesus than Mary could take credit for producing Jesus. Every conversion is a virgin birth, a miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit.

Which brings me to the second reference to the Holy Spirit: Matthew 3:11.

(Read Matthew 3:11)

The interesting thing about this statement is that Jesus himself did not baptize anyone. When John the Baptist says that Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, he means that when you are baptized in Jesus’ name, the Holy Spirit will be part of the process.

Interestingly, the Bible often pictures baptism as a new birth, with the Holy Spirit as the agent of that new birth. Do you see now the connection to the virgin birth? Just as the Holy Spirit did a miraculous new work in Mary to produce Jesus, so the Holy Spirit can do a miraculous new work in you through baptism, bringing Jesus to birth in your life.

This is not an easy process, any more than childbirth. When the Holy Spirit comes into your life it may create a little turmoil. Hence the reference to fire. When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost it was pictured as tongues of fire. The coming of Jesus into your life may create turmoil. He may bring unexpected changes into your life. But they will be good changes, if you allow the Holy Spirit to work.

Ah, but that brings me to the third reference to the Holy Spirit. Look at Matthew 12:31-32.

(Read Matthew 12:31-32)

I find this scripture a little unnerving. Given how many sins we have all committed, it's scary to think one of them might be unforgivable. What is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?

Well, remember the function of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the power of God that brings Jesus to birth in human life, who shapes in us the new life Jesus came to bring. If that is the function of the Holy Spirit, then the sin against the Holy Spirit is the concerted attempt to abort that new life, to stop Jesus from being born in your life or anyone else's.

Earlier in Matthew chapter 12 Jesus heals some people who are sick, and his opponents try to discredit him by saying that he heals people by a demonic power. They say he can cast out demons because he is a prince of demons. That, Jesus says, is a sin against the Holy Spirit.

The problem is not that the opponents of Jesus reject Jesus themselves. That can be forgiven. Many people go through times of doubting Jesus or rejecting Jesus and later come to believe in him. Doubting Jesus or even rejecting Jesus is not the unforgivable sin. But when you go a step further and do everything in your power to thwart other people from believing in Jesus—that is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit is the power of God that brings Jesus to birth in our human lives, then the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the determined attempt to abort that process—to thwart the birth of faith in other people.

Friends, don't go there. If you have doubts or struggles about believing in Jesus, that's okay. God can work with that. God can work with your doubts, even with your hypocrisy. If you claim to believe in Jesus, but your life does not measure up to that belief, that's okay. God's can work with that. But if you intentionally set out to destroy another person's faith, especially if you are in a position of power over that person, you are crossing a very dangerous boundary.

And that brings me to the last reference to the Holy Spirit: Matthew 28:19-20.

(Read Matthew 28:19-20)

If the Holy Spirit is the power of God that brings Jesus to birth in human life, then our job is to be the virgin Mary. Our job is to allow God to use us as a vehicle for the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

In Acts chapter 1 Jesus says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses.” The Holy Spirit is the power of God that uses us to make disciples, that uses our gifts, our personalities, our experiences to bring Jesus into human life.

That is what our pledge of time and talents is all about this morning. This is not a campaign about money. We will get to that again next fall. This is not a campaign about money, it is a campaign about you. This morning we want you to make a pledge of *yourselves*—your gifts, your talents, your interests, your time—to help bring the love of Jesus Christ into the lives of other people.

In a moment at the end of this sermon before we sing a hymn, we will have a time of silence. During this time of silence I invite you to pray silently and then to fill out the 2010 Time and Talent Pledge on the beige insert in the bulletin. On this insert we are not asking you to volunteer for a specific job. If you want to volunteer for a specific form of service, like, say, teaching Vacation Bible School, you can do that on the back. But what we want most is for you to offer yourself: your passion, your skills, your personality in service to Christ. Then the pastors, elders, or program staff leaders in the church can take this information and explore with you how your particular passions, skills, and personality can be a vehicle of the Holy Spirit in our world.

One final note: you do not have to be perfect or even particularly holy to do this. No where does the Bible say that Mary was sinless. Nor does Matthew say that Mary was more holy than other people. We have no idea why God chose Mary, but the Holy Spirit worked through her bring Jesus into the world, and the Holy Spirit can do the same with you, if you allow it.

Bill Robinson, the retiring president of Whitworth University, tells of one Sunday preaching at the Myung Sung Presbyterian Church in Korea. He preached in English, and his sermon was translated into Korean. Afterwards he asked the translator if his sermon was okay. The translator replied, “Not bad, but not nearly as good as the one I preached (*Of Mind and Heart*, Whitworth University newsletter, Summer, 2004).

You don’t have to be perfect to be a witness for Jesus, just available. Because the sermon you preach with your life won’t be nearly as good as the one the Holy Spirit preaches through you.

- Ken Onstot
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