

Luke 1:26-38

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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The history of the Church's reflection on the stories of Jesus' birth is probably as complicated and mysterious as the stories themselves. It is probably impossible for us to hear the birth stories - to "get" them - with same ears - the same understanding - as the first hearers would have.

For one thing, we need to remind ourselves that for many centuries the birthday of Jesus was not a major celebration in the church. The church does not exist because Jesus was born; it exists because Jesus was crucified, died, was buried, and rose again on the third day. Holy Week and Easter Sunday are the founding festivals of the church.

We also need to remind ourselves that it is only within recent times that childhood is understood to be a time of development with genuinely different phases, ages, and stages; with genuine novelty and growth at each stage. Prior to this, children were understood to be like young plants that simply grew into larger versions of themselves, but with no fundamentally different developments along the way. Thus childhood was always interpreted in hindsight: what was true at the end of person's life must also have been present at their birth. Just as Jesus rose from the dead - emerged from the tomb - with a spiritual body, so it must have been true that he emerged from the womb with a spiritual conception.

The spiritual conception of Jesus at the beginning of his life is just another way of pressing home the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Is God present in Jesus or not? And if God is present in Jesus, how would you describe that?

Personally I don't think it is helpful or fruitful to speculate how this could be "scientifically" true since science rules God out of any explanation of what is really real right from the get go. I'm a big fan of science, don't get me wrong. I just don't think there is any scientific evidence that science is the ONLY way of knowing what is really real.

So basically, I'm prepared to believe that Jesus was really born, and that Mary, who was the only person who was present at both his conception and his death, and who pondered these things, was able to testify that, "You know, there was something special about my dear Jesus right from the beginning."

I'm also prepared to believe there is some historical authenticity to the story, because if you momentarily remove it from the warmth and peacefulness of Christmas, it is a frightening and terrifying tale:

A young woman (as young as 12 or 13) is caught alone by a powerful male who says, "Don't be afraid, this won't hurt. You are going to be overpowered and become pregnant. I'll leave you. You'll have a baby out of wedlock. And no one will believe your story of how you got pregnant."

Preachers, especially powerful males, should be aware of the memory traces this story may stir up among their congregations.

What is also shocking about this story though, is that it is preserved and told as being the origins of the Holy One, our Jesus. If you don't think the gossip about Joseph not being the real father and Mary being pregnant before they married didn't make the rounds, you have never lived in a

small town. And if you don't think that gossip and rumors dogged Jesus everywhere he went - including to the cross - you have no idea how far people will go to keep someone in their place.

And so, just as the story of Jesus' life is bookended with a special embedding of the spiritual and the material (spiritual conception at birth; spiritual body at resurrection), so too, just within each bookend, as the first and last "books" on the shelf, are stories of total shame, violation and degradation (pregnancy outside of wedlock; naked execution on a cross).

And just as the opening of the story of Jesus' execution is his struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, ending with, "Not my will but thine be done;" so there is a parallel in the story of Jesus' conception, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me as you have said."

Whatever the actual circumstances of Mary's conceiving of Jesus may have been, the story is not hushed up and buried over. It is remembered. And Mary testifies that as it was at the end, when the power of God's love redeemed a shameful death, so it was at the beginning, the power of God's love was present then too and redeemed a shameful birth.

May it be so for us, here and now. May our shaming be remembered, not buried, and may it be redeemed by the power of God's love and empowered to bring forth new life to the glory of God.

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