

# ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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## The Meaning of Mary

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 22, 2013  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent—Based on Matthew 1:18-25*

In a couple of parishes I have served, the fourth Sunday of Advent is reserved for the Children's Christmas pageant. Though the custom was in place long before I arrived, I always imagined that it was the inspired move by some former rector to avoid having to preach on Mary. We love Mary, but we are never quite sure what to do with her. One Sunday morning on this appointed day a number of years ago, the pageant was underway and all was well—save for a rather detached and wandering Joseph. He had been a bit of a problem in all the rehearsals; but because he had been chosen for this supporting role, no one had the heart to fire him. Firing children generally is frowned upon and especially at church. So on the day of the pageant, his behavior, not surprisingly, was theatrical only in its naughtiness. About halfway through, Mary had had enough of his antics. Without a word to signal her intention, with a startlingly loud thud she plopped the baby down—thank God that we had gone with a doll that year—stomped across the chancel, walloped Joseph on the side of the head, pulled him back to his position, and said in a loud stage whisper, "Sit." And he did reverently for the remainder of the tableau. I have not followed this young man in his life, but my guess is it has involved rather extensive therapy.

Much has been written on the Virgin Birth, tomes in fact, about half of which has been used to support this extraordinary claim and another half devoted to disproving it by parsing translations, particularly of the Septuagint, the late second century translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Koine Greek. You no doubt have encountered this rather tedious discussion of whether the Hebrew word *alma* is appropriately translated in Greek as *parthenos* and whether each word in both Isaiah and Matthew is more appropriately understood as "young maiden" or "virgin." I will happily have that conversation with any one of you over coffee, but truthfully the dispute has no homiletic appeal to me and is only slightly interesting. Whatever you decide, and ultimately it must be you who make that decision, won't significantly change your life; and to focus much attention on the question misses the point.

The point is the story: our story, the story of Jesus. It is a huge story, one worthy of all sorts of embellishments and hyperboles, but a story that does not live or die on the basis of a single detail, but on its huge arc through and about God's interaction with us. What it claims as truth about God—in each rich aspect and even more in its broad scope—is for me the defining account of how God is. I cherish how Matthew begins this portion of the gospel: *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way*—marvelous words to signal that a definitive tale is about to be told and that each of us is invited to hear it. When I read these words, it is as though I am seated at the feet of a great storyteller with twinkling eyes, who is about to unfold for me an archetypal story that will help me make sense of my life. And it does. For you see, in an extraordinary manner, God chooses in this story to come close, an action not required of gods, who, I suppose, can do as they desire. But the God of Christmas chooses to be near, to make God's self known or at least knowable, not for us to possess or contain but for us to encounter in mystery and awe. In the miracle of Christmas God comes close enough for us to know that even what we cannot know is good and that in both knowing and not knowing, God is present.

Among its other lessons, we learn from this part of the story that women are worthy of being named and appreciated. Mary is not an unnamed vessel but a person with a name, a person with a past and a future, a person who plays a crucial role in this amazing story of God's

coming near. Understanding as we do the cultural role for women at the time allows us to see dramatically what this signifies about God. Though it would take a couple of millennia of further cultural evolution for God's message to become clear, the woman in this story is not second-class but essential to the story of God and us from the beginning—not an object to be used but a fully equal character in the account of life. The birth of Jesus teaches us that women are honored for this gift of life, not simply used to produce it.

Incarnation is a big word and a bigger theological notion, one that I have come to believe is better lived than intellectualized. Jesus was born as we are, not materialized from nothing but born of flesh. Matthew took great care in the first 17 verses of this chapter to delineate Jesus' lineage; and the fact that it does not stand up to close historical scrutiny doesn't matter at all. This is not a historical record but much more than that: It is a mysterious account of how God, particularly incarnate in this person of Jesus, came to live among us. Jesus, regardless of the particulars of his conception, was born of a woman, bursting, as each of us, into life through the most ordinary and, yet, utterly miraculous process in the world. We know it as birth, and Jesus' experience of it roots him indelibly in our world.

The mere fact of Jesus' birth firmly established the manner in which he came to live as the standard for how we are to relate to one another. If "God became human," as our theology purports, how then can we not respect the dignity and worth of every single human being? The teaching of the incarnation never ends; it is the demand of the Christ-ethic, the way of living, which we claim to emulate: that we love one another. From that moment no one can be understood as a loser; in the world of incarnation, there can be no outcasts. In its fullness, the great mystery of the "divine" birth is that it makes us more human, God entering the ordinary to make it extraordinary. You see, my friends, God's coming close enhances the genuine humanness for which we were born—not to make us other worldly, as religion is sometimes accused of doing, but to show us how to transform this world.

Emmanuel: God with us—that is the story of Advent IV, of the coming event of Christmas, and of every day of our lives. The Incarnation means that God is with us when our lives are going well, when jobs are meaningful and all our children are happy. And it also means that God is with us when our lives are messy and complicated, when things have not worked out as we hoped, when the worst has occurred, when relationships are ragged, some beyond repair. The Incarnation means that God is with us when we are healthy, youthful and filled with unending promise; and it also means that God is with us when we are sick and worried, facing the uncertainty of aging and the certainty of death.

The Incarnation means that God is with us in the beginning, at the end and at every moment along the way. The hours for waiting are short, my friends, for our Savior draws near again.

In the name of God: *Amen.*