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# Advent 4. It Matters

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 21 December

Isaiah 7:10-16 • Matthew 1:18-25



**The Birth of Jesus the Messiah:** Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to

dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## **Undermining the Foundations at a Cost.**

The “Slippery Slope” and the flow on effect.  
Jesus’ Birth Extraordinary. It Matters.

## **Faith required – But not blind faith.**

It pays to know the story.

## **God’s Guiding and Leading.**

What of dreams?

## The Bible - The Spirit - The Body

Prayer: Lord Jesus, speak into our hearts and minds. Encourage and equip us as look into your word, amen.

A number of years ago a church that had a reputation for pushing the boundaries put up a very controversial Christmas billboard.

On it was Joseph and Mary in bed. Mary had a very satisfied look on her face and Joseph looked somewhat downcast and frustrated. The caption at the top of the billboard: "Poor Joseph, God was a hard act to follow."

It certainly got attention. Globally.

While some probably giggled and saw the funny side of it, I felt uncomfortable with it for at least two reasons.

- Firstly, it felt distasteful because it ran the risk of sexualising something that was purely spiritual. That could be triggering and opens all sorts of questions when it comes to power dynamics.
- Secondly, because of the theological implications of casting doubt the biblical account of the birth of Jesus.

The gospel tells us that God, in Jesus Christ, entered our world and our experience in the fullest possible way that first Christmas. And yes, while there are deep, deep mysteries involved in the trinity and the virgin birth, at it's heart the Gospel is simple.

God in Jesus Christ becomes like us, so we can become like him. Jesus, through the work of the cross, deals with our sin and our alienation from God, and does for us what we can't do for ourselves. He saves us.

And yes, as mind boggling, and reason stretching as some of the details are, the details matter. They matter because to dismiss what the bible said happened in regards Jesus conception is something of a slippery slope.

When we discredit or deny a foundational gospel truth there will be a flow on effect. And more often than not we will find that gospel truths will soon be falling like domino's.

It's clear that a foundational gospel truth is being undermined from the comments the then Vicar, made when the press asked him what the billboard was all about.

I quote. “ *the aim of the billboard has been to Lampoon the literal interpretation of the Christmas conception story.*”

In other words Jesus had a human father. Let that sink in for a moment. There is a lot at stake. The very essence of the Gospel.

I think it would be true to say those who deny foundational truths very often end up sitting on the branch they are sawing through. Take away the virgin birth and we have no gospel. How can Jesus be sinless if he comes in the line of Adam. At the very least you would have to do away with the fall and original sin if Jesus was conceived by purely human means.

Further, if Jesus was just a man, he is simply one more in a long list that have not been able to deal with the problem of human sin and our alienation with God.

Further, if just a man, as C.S Lewis said, he would have had to have been either mad or bad, to make the claims he did. Would we be sitting here in church this morning if we thought Jesus was mad or bad?

We are here because we either agree that he was who he said he was, or we are at least open to it and are investigating, seeing what the evidence is. Following through with the implications of that Christmas billboard; if Jesus were just a man, would we not be left wondering about his miracles, his resurrection, our salvation?

Deny the foundational teaching about Jesus conception and it's likely we will go on to discredit, deny, and or doubt, other key gospel doctrines.

You've probably heard it. Maybe even thought it. Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead. It's just his teaching lives on in our hearts.

Let's be clear, make symbolic what the bible holds to be literal, and Jesus will be stripped of his authority. If Jesus is stripped of his authority the best he can do is influence us. That is if we so choose.

Further, make symbolic what the bible says is literal, and what of the grace of God. What of the power of the Holy Spirit?

- How do we overcome the presence and power of evil?
- How do we find forgiveness when we succumb to temptation, as we all do?

Mind you, take the supernatural out of the bible and there is no enemy of souls, and no power of evil either.

Now, given I'm making a reasonably big statement by saying those who deny the basic tenants of Christianity are on a slippery slope to believing not much at all. I thought I better look up where the billboard vicar is now. He is still leading a church in a different denomination.

Last week I watched a 2024 video of his and carefully looked at the written transcript that went along with it.

The title of the talk. "What I believe." He starts by saying he used to believe all the stuff in the bible, then goes on to list what he no longer believes in.

- A supernatural being called God
- Jesus healing and nature miracles.
- Jesus death atoning for our sin.
- The incarnation, that is God in Christ coming that first Christmas Day.
- Jesus thinking he was God Son.
- The Trinity
- Resurrection.
- The fall.
- Original sin.

And so the dominoes fell. Towards the end I was wondering what he does believe in given the title of the talk. Well here it is. "non religious spirituality and love". I'm not sure what that means.

Now to be fair, I don't know what that one has been through in his life. I don't know the stories of his parishioners and the faith, and or, life struggles they may have shared with him that may well have caused him to let go of many of the things he once believed in. I don't know his faith journey.

But at this stage, it looks like it is a journey from a gospel faith, to a non gospel, "religionless spirituality". I pray that God in his mercy may

redirect that one, especially as they are leading a congregation, and folk will be looking to him to direct and guide them spiritually.

I pray that God in his mercy my redirect and restore him.

As indeed he redirected and restored me, when after having given my life to Christ at 16, I was all keen for awhile, then got sidetracked. I eventually found myself looking into all sorts of weird and esoteric spiritualities for about ten years.

Trying to figure it all out I read myself into a pit of despair. On the one hand I was reading many of the currant and historical Christian writers and philosophers. On the other hand I was reading the leading agnostics, sceptics and atheists.

Then one day I read a line by pascal the Christian philosopher and mathematician from the 16th century. "He who looks for God has already found him"

As I read that, it was as if the finger of God pierced my heart, and I understood that my very struggle and search was a sign of God's goodness and grace. Even though I had shaken my fist at him literally, and been pretty vocal about my feelings, God's goodness and grace eventually overpowered me.

I have not had many tangible physical supernatural things happen in my life. But if I had not been lying in bed when I read what I read I would have hit the floor so overpowering God's presence.

I think it was his reassurance to me that though I had wandered, and struggled, and brought myself to a place of deep confusion and desperation, God had always been there. And God was not going to give up on me. He eventually led me to a place where I sat under thoughtful, passionate, biblical gospel preaching for a number of years, and the rest as they say is history.

My journey has meant I can encourage folk who are struggling and think they have lost faith. Well I know that salvation and bringing us across the line has more to do with God than us. God is faithful and he will do it the gospel assures us.

There are for sure many extraordinary things that happen in the gospel story and that's the point. If it's just about us and what we can do, we are left pretty much trying to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

- Saul the Christian killer would not have become Paul the teacher, evangelist and pastor, without the intervention of the risen Jesus.
- 11 of the 12 disciples would not have lived and died as they did without the real and tangible influence of the resurrected Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Billions of followers of Jesus would be somewhat undercut and disempowered if it's just about us being inspired and trying our best.

It took faith and trust for Joseph to believe a really weird dream about a virgin conception.

In the culture of the day, it took faith and trust for Joseph to risk people either sniggering behind his back thinking, forgive me, he was marrying "used" goods. Or judging him because, forgive me again, he hadn't "kept it in his loin cloth or whatever" during the engagement process.

Mary is pregnant and Joseph is told how it happened via a dream. It helps to know that through scripture dreams are a pretty standard way of God telling people things.

Vs 20. Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. This is no ordinary conception. This is no ordinary child. Do not be afraid. Have faith. Trust me

How was it that Joseph could trust and act on the dream?

- Firstly, he knew the biblical story and he knew about the promised Messiah, the promised saviour.
- Secondly, He knew the biblical story and he knew about the power of God.

The dream wasn't asking him to believe something that hadn't happened before in the sense of God bringing life where life should be impossible.

Way back near the beginning of the story in the OT, Sarah & Abram, now both old, with Sarah unable to conceive even when young, Abraham was told by God to count the stars, so will be the number of

your decentdents be. So ridiculous did it seem that Sarah, who was listening in, laughed out loud.

Another case far closer to home. Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, is pregnant under what seemed like impossible circumstances.

“For nothing will be impossible for God” the angel says to Mary as she is told the circumstances of her own pregnancy when she said how? I'm a virgin. Nothing will be impossible for God.

Let's note though, that Joseph is being asked to believe something that goes beyond anything God had done up to that point. Joseph knew the story. He knew the power of God. He knew that God had brought life where life would seem to be impossible.

But this is a one off. There is only one that is fully God and fully man. Nothing like it had ever happened before and it was not going to happen again. Joseph was being asked to step out in faith in the most extraordinary way. Not just life where life seemed impossible, via human means. But life where life would seem impossible, via a purely supernatural and spiritual means.

Jesus' birth was extraordinarily extraordinary. That matters.

- It matters because of the nature of salvation.
- It matters because of the righteousness of God.
- It matter because of our inability to deal with human sin and the consequences.
- It matters to a bunch of other stuff that is tied to the why, and the way, that God did, and does work.

Be encouraged. And hang onto the truth that nothing is, or will be, impossible for God. Apart that is, from God acting outside his character and nature. God can't be unloving or unjust or evil.

As God works within the bounds of his character and nature “Nothing will be impossible for God.”

Take that principle and apply it elsewhere.

- Hope. God can bring hope, where hope should be impossible.
- Peace. God can bring peace where peace should be impossible.

- Forgiveness, joy, healing, whatever our situation, whatever our circumstance or needs, God can do what's needed, even when what is needed might seem impossible to us.
- Even life after death. That is the hope and promise of the Gospel and the Gospel gives us grounds to believe and trust.

Can we believe it? Well it sure helps when we know the story, and we take the story seriously. That's why knowing God's word, the bible, is so important.

And while there is much that is hard to comprehend and understand, the virgin conception being no exception, there is plenty we will understand as we allow the Holy Spirit to open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to the truths found in God's word.

We can also be greatly helped as God leads and guides through faithful witnesses who believe in and live the Gospel.

In a world of scepticism and doubt, sometimes even promoted by church leaders, as we seek to hold true to God's Word, can trust that we will come to know what we need to know as we continue the journey to that great day when the Lord Jesus returns.

“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

For nothing will be impossible for God. If our faith is to mean anything, that matters.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, God with us and for us. Increase our faith. Help us to trust and follow you, that we and those around us might know and experience your love, to the glory of God, amen.

