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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent 4, Series B/Christmas Eve
Sunday, December 24th, 2017

Sermon: Bad Girls Begat Jesus: Mary

Texts: Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38

Focus Statement: Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary to save us from our sins.

Function Statement: That they would rejoice at the wonderful news of the Savior born to die.

Sermon Structure: Story-Interrupted

Doctrinal Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord..." (SC, Explanation of the Second Article of the Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Merry Christmas! *Merry Christmas!* Over the past few weeks, we have been getting to the core of the Christmas story by examining Jesus' roots and, in particular, the women of his family tree. We learn something about who we are when we look at where we came from. The same is true of Jesus. In the verses immediately preceding our Gospel lesson tonight, you can read the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1-17). And one of the most amazing discoveries you will make is that all five women mentioned in Jesus' genealogy have a bit of a shady past. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba all seem to have something to cover up or explain away. As Martin Luther writes in his

Christmas Book, “there were no savory women” in Jesus’ family tree.¹

All of this underscores the remarkable grace of God by including such people in Jesus’ ancestry. Yet tonight we uncover the greatest scandal of all: the virgin birth of Jesus Christ!

Little Mary might have seemed like a nobody from nowhere, a poor Jewish girl from the backwater town of Nazareth, of which one of Jesus’ own disciples later quipped, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46, ESV).² Nevertheless, she “found favor with God,” as the angel Gabriel told her (Luke 1:30). The Holy Spirit would overshadow her, and—without ever having sexual relations with a man—she would conceive a child who would be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

At first, Mary was confused and confounded by this message. “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (1:34). Mary was no dummy! Even a young, innocent girl like she knew the birds and the bees.

¹ Martin Luther, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, trans. and ed. Roland H. Bainton (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 19.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

The angel assured her that “nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37).

To which Mary stunningly replied, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (1:38). And so the little handmaiden humbly submitted to God’s will, believing and obeying the Word of the Lord. Mary believed the impossible and trusted God to strengthen her to become the mother of God’s own Son. “Had she not believed,” Martin Luther writes, “she could not have conceived.... Even so must we be transformed and renewed in heart from day to day. Otherwise Christ is born in vain.”³

But explaining the angel’s message to Mary’s fiancé, Joseph the carpenter, would be no simple task. Joseph was a righteous man, but certainly nobody’s fool. Who ever heard of a pregnant virgin, anyway? This was all too much to take. Joseph knew the child was not his, so all he could imagine was that Mary had been unfaithful to him and cheated with another man.

³ Luther, *Christmas Book*, 23.

Yet Mary's apparent infidelity put her life at risk. Pregnant teenagers are not uncommon in our world today. But in the ancient world there was only one punishment for adultery: being stoned to death by being pummeled painfully with rocks. Unwed mothers "in the family way" were not sent away to a distant relative's house until the baby was born. Nor did they have free daycare so that teen moms could keep going to school. They certainly didn't get their own reality show on MTV or TLC! No, there was only one doom for pregnant teenagers in ancient Israel: death.

As painful as Joseph's apparent betrayal was, he could not bear to see this fate befall Mary, and so he sought to "divorce her quietly" (Matt. 1:19), that is, to break off the engagement without spectacle. After all, Joseph was a righteous man; there was nothing vengeful or spiteful about him.

But God intervened before Joseph could do the wrong thing for the right reasons, as Jeff Gibbs bluntly puts it.⁴ The Lord appeared to

⁴ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 105.

Joseph in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:20). The baby growing in Mary’s womb was not the result of a natural union between Mary and another man. Nor was he the result of God having sex with Mary (that is the pagan concept captured by Mormonism, but not Christianity).

No, the baby Jesus was the miraculous result of God’s creative Spirit. For just as the Holy Spirit hovered above the waters in creation when the Word of God spoke all things into existence—“‘Let there be light’ and there was light”—so also Jesus was conceived when the Holy Spirit, “the Lord and giver of life” (Nicene Creed), said, “Let there be life,” and there *was* life! God the Creator became a creature and came down from heaven to enter into the Mary’s womb.

According to Matthew, this happened to fulfill Isaiah’s wonderful prophecy: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us)” (Matt. 1:23; cf. Isa. 7:14). Jesus Christ is Immanuel, “God *with* us” and God *for* us! Jesus is God in human flesh, born to die, that he might save us from our

sins. For that is what his name means. “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from his sins” (Matt. 1:21). The name Jesus is the New Testament form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “the Lord saves.” Jesus does what his name means. He saves his people from their sins. He saved Mary and Joseph from their sins. And he saves you and me from our sins, if are willing to believe in the babe of Bethlehem.

The virgin birth of Jesus is still something of a scandal. Just as Mary wondered about the mechanics of it, and Joseph initially questioned the fact of it, so also today many people have a hard time believing what C.S. Lewis calls “the Grand Miracle” of the Incarnation. After all, who ever heard of a pregnant teenager? Historical critics and liberal Bible scholars go to great lengths to explain away Isaiah’s prophecy and fulfillment. They wrongly suggest that the word for “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14 just means a young woman of marrying age. But even in the context of Isaiah, there would be nothing remarkable about a young woman giving birth to a newborn baby—*unless* she was a virgin. And, in actuality, the Hebrew and Greek words, as well as the

surrounding context make it quite clear that Mary was a virgin—as she told the angel (Luke 1:34).

Jesus was not Joseph’s biological child. He was not the bastard of an imagined affair between Mary and another man. And he was not the offspring of a Roman soldier who forced her. Jesus had no human father. Because Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Luke 1:35). “That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:20).

There are many things about the Bible that are sometimes hard to believe: the six-day creation, the worldwide Flood of Noah, the crossing of the Red Sea, Jonah and the whale, and Jesus rising from the dead on the third day. Throughout history, there have always been people unwilling to accept the scandal of the Incarnation and the miracle of the virgin birth. Yet perhaps we should remember that the most outrageous miracle of all is that a holy God could love and forgive unholy, unrighteous, imperfect, selfish sinners like us. And yet that is precisely what Jesus does. He came to forgive your sins because he loves people like you and me. “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). So why not believe the simple truth of Scripture? It costs you

nothing, but cost God everything: even the life of his Son, given upon the cross.

Jesus is “the one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5) because he *is* God and man together at once. Nobody comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6). Truly, he is “the only-begotten Son of God... who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man” (Nicene Creed). Fully God and fully human, Jesus is our Immanuel, “God with us.”

So set aside your doubts and fear. Jesus came down from heaven *for you*. According to Luther, “This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that He is the son of the virgin and God himself, as to believe that this Son of God is ours.”⁵ Nevertheless, you cannot have Christmas without Christ, and you cannot have Christ without the virgin birth. So do not hesitate to come and adore him, Jesus Christ, the Son of

⁵ Luther, *Christmas Book*, 23.

God and son of Mary. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T
the Holy Spirit. Amen. Merry Christmas!