

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

In the name of him who for us was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: throughout this season of Advent we have been engaged in the task of preparing the way for the Lord's coming. Heeding the words of his prophets, we've been "making straight his path and smooth his road" so that when he comes he will have easy access into our hearts and minds. This image of preparing a smooth road is a good one. When constructing a road, you have to start with the rough cutting and shaping. Here in Southwest Iowa where we've got this rolling terrain it's easy to see this. You simply can't have a nice, level road without doing a lot of work. You have to lower the high places and raise up the low ones. And most of that sort of earthmoving is done with heavy bulldozers and low belly scrapers. They're great for getting the basic shape of the roadway; but they're not very good for the doing finish work. No, for that you need machines that have a gentler touch like road graders and various kinds of rollers. That's what you use to shape the actual surface of the road to give you a smooth ride.

And this is a good analogy for where we've come so far in our Advent preparations. For the past couple weeks, we've been listening to John the Baptist whose fiery message of turn or burn, repent or be swept away, has had all the force of a bulldozer and the corresponding finesse of blasting with dynamite. He's been doing the rough and sometimes brutal work of attacking our hills of pride and filling in our valleys of sin – which, to be perfectly accurate, is always an ongoing job. Just the same, by virtue of his having done this work on us, we are at this point ready for some of the finer work to be done on the Lord's access roads to our hearts. So with this morning's Scripture readings we set aside John the bulldozer and the preliminary preparations of repentance in order to turn to some gentler but equally important persons who will help us smooth the surface of the King's highway by causing us to reflect upon the wonder and mystery of the Lord's incarnation; that is, the miracle of our God becoming flesh.

The gentler characters here to help us today are the young man Joseph who was chosen to become the stepfather and guardian of Jesus, and most especially the humble and faithful maiden named Mary who was given the honor of bearing our Savior in her womb and giving him birth. Clearly these two saints occupy a vital role in the unfolding of God's plan to save his people from sin. And the lessons we learn from them will be an important part of finishing our Advent roads that lead to a Bethlehem stable. But as we consider them, we want to exercise a certain amount of caution. "The way of the Lord" that we are preparing has ditches on both sides. And it has often happened in the history of the church that people who have come this far have steered off and fallen into the ditch on one side or the other.

One of these ditches represents the well-intentioned but theologically disastrous attempts to raise the holy couple (and especially Mary) to a level of being higher than the rest of humanity. In certain church circles, Mary is given a role that effectively makes a goddess of her. She is called the "Co-Redemtrix", which means that by her personal suffering and merit she helped Christ redeem us from our sins. She is prayed to with the expectation that she will answer with miracles; or, because of her special place in God's heart, she is thought to be able to persuade the Lord to more gracious than he would be otherwise. The sad result of these attempts to make God more accessible by putting what's perceived to be a more approachable, motherly, human face on him is that it adds another layer of confusion, thus obscuring the

biblical truth and making the Lord more distant and unreachable. The reformers did well to cast these false notions about Mary away from the church.

But sadly, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of lesser forms of such Mariolatry that have infiltrated even some conservative Lutheran circles. One such teaching, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, is the unscriptural idea that Mary was somehow preserved free from the curse of original sin and that she lived her own life without sinning in any way. People who hold this view believe that it's necessary in order to allow the developing baby Jesus to grow in a sacred place and so not become defiled – which is really quite silly when you consider that he was sent into this filthy, sin-filled world precisely to be defiled for us. Another idea, the teaching of the perpetual virginity of Mary, is the unfounded claim that after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph never consummated their marriage and instead lived together in celibacy. The thought is that having been used by the Lord for so holy a purpose, it would be unthinkable for Mary to then use her body for mere common and natural things. Such a claim, however, flies straight in the face of the Lord's specific command for Joseph to take Mary *as his wife*, and it further insults God's design and order of creation – as well as denigrating the sanctity of marriage that he created. People who think this way are taking it upon themselves to call "unclean" what the Lord has declared to be holy. But again, the underlying goal of those who hold these sorts of ideas is to raise Mary to a level of existence higher than the rest of us – which in turn forces them to miss the full impact and meaning of the miracle of God's grace that takes place within her and how it applies to the rest of us.

More on that in a bit; but first, having pointed out the dangers that some make by elevating Mary too high, I want to warn about the ditch on the other side of the road that we want to avoid. It's the claim of some other people that denies that there was anything special or unique about Mary's pregnancy, and that Jesus' conception and birth was just as natural as yours or mine. This is the assumption of most unbelievers, and it's to be expected of them. The trouble is that it's also the belief of many people within the church – primarily in the liberal mainline protestant denominations. As a rule, these people deny *all* the miracles the Bible records. They simply don't believe that God works and acts directly in and with his Creation and that everything that happens must have a natural, scientific explanation. About this view, first let it be said that there's nothing new about it. As we heard in this morning's Gospel reading, it was the conclusion that Joseph himself came to. It was only logical. If Mary was pregnant, he assumed that it had to be the result of purely human effort. And since he knew that he hadn't been involved, he decided to divorce her. But as we heard today from Isaiah, St. Matthew, and St. Paul, it was a wrong conclusion. All three of them, standing on the authority of God's Word, affirm the truth that Jesus was born of a virgin and that he had no biological human father. And it's essential that we believe this, for those who claim otherwise are compelled to believe that Jesus was just another ordinary human being – that he had no divine nature and was not God the Son. And follow it through: if Jesus is not both true God and true man, then the fundamental truth of Christianity, namely that God became a man in order to suffer and die and be the sacrifice that atoned for the sins of the world – *that* most important truth of the faith is wrong. If you don't believe in the virgin birth, you end up throwing the whole thing out the window.

Now, it happened that when Joseph fell into this ditch of jumping to natural conclusions about Mary's condition (and we can understand why he did), the Lord intervened to lift him out of it and set him back on the road. In a dream, an angel appeared to him and explained that there was no reason to fear that Mary had been unfaithful to him. The child she carried within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

That must have been some dream. At times most of us dream some pretty strange things; but we don't get up and act on them as if they were true. Joseph did. He did so after having what we would all call a *very* unusual dream. Put yourself in his place when he awoke and asked himself, "What was that all about?" He had gone to bed broken-hearted. He was sure that the girl he loved had betrayed him. He was probably furious ... and yet for the feelings he had for her, he could not bring himself to have her publicly charged with adultery; though he could have. And the punishment would have been severe. Surely, he thought, her shame and disgrace would be punishment enough. But now he awoke, and armed only with the message of a dream – a dream that his rational mind must have been telling him was just a silly illusion born more of frustrated hopes than of fact – he stepped back up onto the Advent road with Mary, his wife, believing that though pregnant she was still a virgin, and that she had been completely faithful to him.

How this is possible, that a man could believe the unbelievable against his reason, against his experience, against his emotions, and against his many doubts and fears is worthy of our attention and consideration. It is nothing short of miraculous. And what I want you to see is that it's not very different than what happened to Mary. Now, of course, in one sense what happened to her was unique. An angel appeared to her and told her that she was going to bear the holy Son of God who would sit on the throne of David in an eternal kingdom. When she asked how this was going to happen since she was still a virgin – thinking as she was, just like Joseph, in purely human terms – the angel told her that the child would be conceived by the Holy Spirit; that is to say, it would be an act of God upon and within her. But we ask, "Specifically *how* did that happen? Precisely *when* did the Holy Spirit conceive the Christ child within her?" The answer is that it happened as the angel spoke to her by the very Word of God she heard. The Spirit of God *always* works through the power of the Living Word – which Word isn't just information: it is the person of God the Son. The Word of God is God the Son. So understand this: the Word became flesh in her by the Holy Spirit working through the very message of the angel who told her she was going to bear the Christ child. That's how the miracle of the conception of God's Son within a virgin took place.

In very much the same way, the miracle by which Joseph *believed* the angel's message also took place. By the power of the Spirit working through the message of the angel in his dream, faith in the Word was *conceived* in his heart and mind. Joseph's faith was also conceived by the Holy Spirit. But stay with me here: that Word by which the Spirit conceived faith within Joseph was not just abstract concepts about God; no, again, it was the very person of Christ – Christ Jesus, the Word, who is both true man and true God. What that means is that the flesh and blood Jesus carried in Mary's womb was also being carried in the heart and mind of both her and her husband Joseph – and indeed, in the heart and mind of everyone who like them believes that in Jesus, God became flesh. If you believe that God became flesh in Christ, then that same Christ dwells within you and he *is truly* Immanuel: God with us.

And going back to what was said earlier, this is why it's so important that we stay on the road and not fall into the ditches. On one hand, if we imagine that the earthly parents of Jesus were on a level of spiritual being higher than the rest of us, we will miss the fact that the miracle of Christ in them is the same miracle that we now experience. In these sinful bodies you and I who believe carry God the Son in the flesh. He is in and with us physically, not in just some fuzzy spiritual sense. It's part of why we are collectively called "the body of Christ". On the other hand, we want to avoid the ditch of imagining that this faith – this conception of Christ – we have is the result of human effort or reasoning. That takes the miracle of God's presence and power out of it. It reduces the Christian faith to mere information about God instead of what

it is: the living, breathing Christ within us, cleansing us of our sin and empowering us to do his holy will.

Now, in the event that I lost you somewhere along the way or that you're still having some trouble fully grasping what I'm trying to say here, it may help to consider the Sacrament of Holy Communion because the same miracle takes place in it. Think about it: when words of institution are spoken, the Word of Christ that declares that the bread is his body makes it so. The Son of God is physically present in his human body in the bread by the power of his Spirit active through the Word. You cannot see it, nor could you even believe it – except by the Spirit working through the Word to conceive the faith in your heart. Then, kneeling to receive him, you take him into your body and he literally becomes a part of you – and you of him. So, in every communion service we celebrate and experience the miracle of Christmas – as well as the miracles of Good Friday and Easter, remembering and believing that the Word become flesh that we receive was given into death for us and that he rose again to declare us free from sin and its curse forever.

This really is what our construction of and travel on the Advent road is all about: preparing ourselves to receive him who comes to us physically to be conceived and born anew in our hearts and minds that we, body, soul, and spirit may be his in time and eternity. May our gracious God keep us always on this path of life as we await his yet greater coming. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!