

I BELIEVE IN MIRACLES

Credo Series (Part 2) | Isaiah 7:14; Luke 1:26-38

I welcome you today to Part Two of CREDO -- a series exploring the Apostles' Creed -- the great beliefs that form the rock-solid substance of the Christian faith. For some 2,000 years, followers of Jesus have been saying these words to remind themselves and to share with the world certain core convictions about God, his work and his plan, that make a huge difference in life.

In the first installment of our series, Pete Stearns and I each gave a message unpacking what it means to say: **I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son, our Lord**. This idea is at the center of the Apostles' Creed. More importantly, it's at the heart of the life of every genuine Christ-follower over the past 2,000 years. If you haven't thought deeply about who Jesus really is or what it means to have him as your Lord, I hope you'll go to our website and listen to the messages Pete and I gave on this topic.

Today, I want to take us further into what the Apostles' Creed goes on to tell us about Jesus. The next several lines of the creed outline the most important facts of Jesus' life -- facts that have big implications for our lives too. And here's a doozy. We believe in a Lord **who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary**.

Now, if ever there was an unusual subject to explore on Mother's Day, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is probably it! That subject probably didn't show up on your Mother's Day card, did it?! I promise you, however, that before I'm done speaking, most of you are going to be thankful you showed up for this message. You are going to get why this fact about Jesus -- this part of the Christian CREDO -- matters for mothers and for all of us in a really big way. And let me assure you parents of young kids, this message will be G-rated.

The FIRST reason why believing that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary matters is because it fulfills Old Testament prophecy. Why does that matter? Well, I'm betting that if I could show you that one of the major politicians or newscasters of our time was the specific fulfillment of a long list of promises and predictions made hundreds of years ago about a coming Savior of the world, you'd tune into that person differently. You'd treat his or her actions more seriously. Wouldn't you? One of the major reasons why Christians pay attention to the words and work of Jesus at a level they don't give to any other figure (except maybe their Moms at a slightly lower level) is because the facts of Jesus' life lined up with as many as 300 Old Testament prophecies made about the Christ, the Messiah. In fact, in the sermon notes for today on our website, I'm including a link to a website that lists all of them.¹

Today, let's just consider this ONE prophecy. Writing to the Jewish nation at a time of great trouble and confusion, the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, was given a vision that God would one day enter history in a fresh way and set in motion a new era of hope. "How will we know that era is dawning?" people naturally asked. Isaiah answered: **The Lord himself will give you a SIGN...** "Oh, it better be a very bright sign," I can imagine people saying. "A lot of people who claim to be some sort of savior." "No, you won't miss this sign," says Isaiah. **A virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call him Immanuel (which means, 'God with us'). (Isa 7:14)**

Some people have argued through the years that the Hebrew word translated as "virgin" there is more properly translated as "young woman." I understand why. That same word in another Old Testament passage definitely means that. But in the seven other occasions where this term shows up in the Old Testament, it clearly means "virgin." Besides, who would regard the birth of a child to a young woman as much of a SIGN that a savior had come? But if someone who was STILL a virgin was found to be carrying a child – and the most amazing child at that -- that would signify that something VERY special was going on. Wouldn't you agree?

And then, one day, it happened. **God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. Literally, "Immanuel." You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.** The name means, "God saves." **He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High... his kingdom will never end."** "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. (Luke 1:26-37)

When we say, *I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary*, we are getting int from this story about the fulfillment of a staggering, seemingly impossible prophecy. And this is just one of hundreds of such fulfillments in the person and work of Jesus. Belief in the Virgin Birth was important to the Apostles, because it shows that God is faithful to his promises and that Jesus is highly unusual – someone we should definitely pay attention to at a level we don't give to anyone else.

But I believe the Apostles' included this remarkable assertion in their creed because, the Virgin Birth, SECONDLY, shows that Jesus is both human and divine. Would it surprise you to know that in the Early Church, the first big debate was over the question, "Was Jesus really HUMAN?" The first believers saw Jesus do such amazing works of wonder. He spoke with an authority and wisdom like no other person. At Easter they became convinced that He'd overcome death. So, the question arose, *did Jesus just appear to be human?* Maybe he just looked like Clark Kent, but all along he was always

Superman. But, if that was true, then the Cross didn't make sense. In order for the sacrifice there to be real and effective, the penalty for sin had to be laid on a real human lamb. Humanity had to have skin in the game. And, then, the Apostles thought about it. They'd seen Jesus thirst and hunger. They'd seen him weep and get tired. They'd seen him actually DIE. Yes, Jesus was fully human.

As the Apostles progressively died off, the debate eventually turned to the question: "*Was Jesus really DIVINE?*" By the late third and early fourth centuries, a charismatic young intellectual named Arius began arguing that Jesus was actually just a human being that God had endowed with special powers. He was godlike, but certainly not God, in the sense of having existed before his body was born. Arius coined this view of Jesus in a catchy little song that started to go Tik-Tok viral.

But the bulk of the early church, held fast to the Apostles Creed. They remembered that, like no human being ever, Jesus had been "*conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.*" They were convinced that Jesus was not just touched by the Holy Spirit of God; he was conceived by and of one substance with this holiness. The way Jesus had talked about his Heavenly Father, made it clear to the early church that, in some mysterious and magnificent way, He was with God in the beginning (John 1:1-5).

And the song those Christians sang about that belief eventually won out over the song Arius was singing. Many of you know the song that won out. It's called THE GLORIA PATRI: "*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be world without end.*" As my friend, Mike Woodruff remarks: "[These] were fighting words to defend the idea that Jesus Christ is eternal. The Virgin Birth was the birth of none other than God himself."

And, now the Cross made complete sense to the Early Church. Jesus was BOTH human AND divine. Because he was born of a real human mother, Mary, Jesus brought real human flesh to the Cross to pay the price for sin. But because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, he was not tainted by the original SIN that has marked Adam's descendants since the time of Eden. Jesus was not just a lamb, He was a totally blemish-free lamb. In essence, Jesus brought the reality of humanity and the purity of divinity to that Cross. And in this way, Jesus was the one life whose sacrifice would be sufficient to wipe away the sins of the world (Rom 5:12-21).

This is why the doctrine of the Virgin Birth mattered to the early church and should matter to us. But I want to name another reason. The virgin birth also_3.]demonstrates that God can do miracles. Some of us, I know, are confused or skeptical about the subject of miracles. Do they really happen? But, as I see it – and the long history of the Judeo-Christian tradition sees it – miracles undergird our daily life. David Ben-Gurion, the late prime minister of Israel, once remarked: "*Anyone who doesn't believe in miracles simply isn't a realist.*" I like the way the author, Wendell Berry, puts it: "*The miraculous is not extraordinary but the common mode of existence. It is our daily bread.*"

Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine — which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes every year.”²

When your whole life and continuation is a miracle... when you are surrounded by and swimming every day in miraculous grace like a fish lives in water, it becomes understandably hard to recognize the stunning power that is at work on our behalf. Mothers get this. What mother has not thought sometimes: *"If only these kids could wake up and recognize all the good that surrounds them and has been put in motion for them and how frequently they've been rescued from dire consequences by the hand of a heart that loves them?"*

Like children, I think, we naturally look for fireworks and candy as PROOF that God loves us and is truly at work for us, even though we are living daily surrounded by his SIGNS. The Bible certainly makes clear that God can do what seems impossible. As Peter Larson remarks: *"The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked "No Entrance" and left through a door marked "No Exit."*³

So why God doesn't do more spectacular things? Why not more virgin births and stunning healings and resurrections? The great missionary, E. Stanley Jones, once answered that it's because (like a great mom or dad) God wants to inspire our confidence without removing our initiative. Jones writes: *"I believe in miracles, but not too much miracle, for too much miracle would weaken us, make us dependent on miracle instead of our obedience to natural law. [God gives us] just enough miracle to let us know He is there, but not too much, lest we depend on it when we should depend on our own initiative and on His orderly processes for our development."*⁴

Maybe this explains why Jesus – who was born through a miracle and did some three dozen miracles we know of in the Gospels, nonetheless, downplayed them. Phillip Yancey observes that *"Jesus often asked those who had seen a miracle not to tell anyone else... He always turned down requests for a demonstration to amaze the crowds and impress important people... Jesus recognized early on that the excitement generated by miracles did not readily convert into life-changing faith..."* For this reason, Jesus preferred to give people SIGNS not PROOFS of divine power. A proof is something we demand when we want things for ourselves. *"A sign is merely a marker for someone who is looking in the right direction."*⁵

Which brings us back to the person of Mary, the remarkable mother, memorialized forever in the words of the Apostles Creed. If ever there was a human being who set her eyes in the right direction, it is this woman. Sometimes people tell or remember the story as if Mary was something of a victim of God, heroic like most mom's, but a

victim nonetheless. In this version, the angel comes to Mary and says: "*Surprise, girl! You're pregnant. But it's God's baby. Isn't that wonderful?*" No, I don't think it would be. Few people are into "surprises" like that, much less with being physically overwhelmed against their will. But that's NOT the story here. This isn't a tale about a woman God took advantage of. It's not about a woman who suddenly found herself pregnant and courageously kept and raised the baby. The narrative of the Virgin Birth is about a woman who was clearly not YET pregnant when the angel came to visit and could still have made the choice to say NO and stick to her own original plan.

As Albert Winn observes: "*What the virgin birth teaches us is that that Jesus [might] not have been born. God's great central purpose in history [might] not have been achieved, if there had not been a simple peasant girl who was willing to respond to God's initiative, to face all the pain, all the risk, all the unknown, all the suspicion, all the shame and say...*"⁶ **"I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled."** (Luk 1:38).

To bring us to a close, let me just say that the Virgin Birth teaches us a lot of important things about who Jesus is and how God works. But it, finally, reminds us that miracles usually come after obedient self-giving. Mark Jobe recalled last week that the miracle of the multiplying food would not have happened had a child not offered up his lunch and the disciples not obeyed Christ's command to pass out the pieces. But this is a pattern everywhere. The miracle of the magnificent catch of fish would not have happened without Simon Peter offering up his tired body and obeying Christ's call to throw in the nets one more time after an entire night of fruitless fishing. The miracle of our forgiveness from sin would not have happened without Jesus voluntarily offering up his life and obeying His father's calling to the cross.

And on this holiday, let me observe that the miracle that is YOU or ME or the kids in our church and families – as messy and unfinished as we are – would not have happened without mothers who offered themselves up and obeyed the call to love and lift and serve us when it was not easy. Thank you, Moms, for being God's servants, and for seeking to let his creative word be fulfilled through you. You are so worthy of honor. Mary as well and the God who loves and save us above all. This I believe.

¹<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54fda9aae4b0c72416a43fb8/t/598df751d2b8571265362ab5/1502476116977/Mathematical+Proof+for+the+Existence+of+Jesus+by+Prophecies+Fulfilled.pdf>

² Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*.

³ Peter Larson, *Prism* (Jan/Feb 2001)

⁴ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*, p.57-58

⁵ Phillip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p.166, 178

⁶ Albert Curry Winn, *A Christian Primer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990) p.115.