

IV Advent 2008
Church of the Ascension
Munich, Germany
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καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς Παρθένου καὶ
ἐνανθρωπήσαντα

Today's Gospel is of course the famous story of the Annunciation, the visit by the angel Gabriel to a young woman named Mary. He gives her a strange message, that she would give birth to a boy without a man's contribution to the effort. And he implicitly asks her whether she agrees to God's plan for her.

Our version of the Creed says, "by the power of the Holy Spirit he was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man." A lot of people find this line the most difficult part of the Creed to recite with a straight face. They will admit to crossing their fingers at this point. Here is where many find their faith clashes with science, and science wins. There are no recorded instances of human virginal conception, or parthenogenesis. And any such conception would mean that genetically the offspring has to be female, not male.

Others make the faith triumph over science by insisting that God can do whatever God wants. If he can create the universe, God can make a woman pregnant with a boy. So we come to the clash between faith and science—something that always rears its head every time we speak of Mary *the virgin*.

First, I want to point out that the original Greek text of the Creed literally says, he became incarnate (or enfleshed) from the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin, and became human (*anthropos*). The translation we use seems to downgrade the action of Mary—everything was "by the power" of the Spirit *of* her. I'll return to this point later on.

Second, I don't think you can separate this doctrine out from the rest and say it doesn't count, or it is mythological, or merely symbolic, or some such. Jesus is both divine and human. If he is not divine, then his death is just another innocent man strung up for political reasons. People die like that every day in our world—nothing new. If he is only divine, then the whole business of his death and resurrection has nothing to do with us. It would just be God out for a stroll.

I recently had surgery on my foot, and I was awake for the whole delightful procedure. When it was over I decided to tell the operating room team a joke. This fellow dies and goes to heaven, where he finds a long line of souls waiting to get in. Suddenly someone dressed like a surgeon, gloves, mask, gown and all, rushes by, passes the whole line and pops through the Pearly Gates. When finally he gets to the gates himself, the man complains to the angel, "How could you let that surgeon jump the queue like that, just because he's a surgeon?" "Oh that's no surgeon," said the angel. "That's God. He likes to dress up like a surgeon and take a stroll on Earth."

All the nurses and the anesthetist laughed, except the surgeon. He looked at me and said deadpan, "Thanks. The next time I won't be so obvious."

Jesus as God often seems like God out of heaven and becoming like us just to see what it is like to actually be one of his creatures. If so, then his death and resurrection are trivial, and of no consequence to us.

So we have to deal with this story of Mary and the angel. Faith vs. science. There is also history, the passage of time, as we know it. We all have a past, a present, and a future. But we also believe that God created the universe, as the creed says. Science is also wrestling with the theory of the Big Bang—that there was a beginning to space and time and energy and matter. Before that beginning, however, is opaque to science. I know a lot of theorists are trying to get around this, because it bothers them. The latest is Roger Penrose. Scientists don't feel comfortable when they end up where theologians have been for centuries.

But science is about "how," while faith asks, "who and why?"

The origin of the universe is a historical fact—look around you. It's real. But it has another dimension, which is "where did it come from?" Our answer is that God did it, and it was good. You'll recall then beginning of Genesis: the Holy Spirit brooded over the waters of chaos. And God brought from the primeval chaos, which for the author was water, all the creation. That however doesn't appear in the history of the universe, for, as the great German theologian Karl Rahner said, "God is not a datum of the universe." You can't find God with a telescope, not even a radio telescope.

The same issue pertains to the central affirmation of our faith: "on the third day he rose again from the dead." None of the Gospels explains this event. Jesus was not resuscitated: the disciples met something New, yet clearly also Jesus. "If anyone is in Christ," said St. Paul, "he or she is a New Creation." The resurrection was a new act of creation, not a weird interference in the usual order of things. And Paul reminds us that the resurrection declares Jesus to be the Son of God by the action of the Holy Spirit. History records that his disciples immediately claimed this strange event to be true.

The same is true for the conception of Jesus. It is a fresh act of creation, not an interference in the order of things as they are. But it also requires the rest of the story. I mean, if Jesus' conception was some weird virginal origin, and he grew up to live a quiet life in a house with a white picket fence and 2.3 kids and a quiet death, who would have heard? Who would care, besides geneticists?

But Imagine: the origin of the universe took place in a mysterious place until light and space and time came to be. The garden tomb was also a mysterious dark place where a new creation happened. And so, similarly, Mary's womb. History tells us that indeed there was a man named Jesus and his mother's name was Mary. By faith, we see more.

So history tells us mysteries. The first is the creation itself. The second is the creation of Jesus, as God entered your world and mine as a real human being. The third is that this Jesus truly died, as you and I will, and was newly created.

What does this mean to you and me? First, by baptism God has promised the same new creation to you and me, and that starting now. You and I are heirs with Jesus of eternal life. God has already entered the story of your life, your past right at the beginning, your present right this instant, your future yet to come. You are not an accident in someone's bedroom—though your parents may have thought so at the time. From your conception you have been a part not only of human history, but of God's history.

God waits for us to say "yes" to this gift of new and everlasting creation.

And our "yes" matters. This is the importance of Mary's story. The God who created a billion billion galaxies waited on a girl to say "yes." She could have said "no" and then her history would have been very different. No one would have ever heard of her. But the final story is in fact God's story, and his will shall be done. The only question for us is, will we say yes or no? Will we accept the part of God's story that is offered to us?

Science can't help us make that decision. Don't let it get in the way.