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# Marion

## weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”*



SERMON: It's a Miracle! The Hope of the World! Luke 1:26-38, 46-56

This week we finish our series on miracles. What better miracle to end the series and kick off Advent than the virgin birth? If we remember that the miraculous is a divine explanation for something otherwise impossible, the status of this as a miracle doesn't really require explanation. But one more time, remember, the miracle isn't the meaning. The miracle points us to the meaning. Even though this one is a doozy, it's not different in that regard.

So what all is incorporated into the meaning of this miracle? This particular miracle holds a great deal of significance and meaning. This morning we are going to consider what it tells us about the thoroughness of the gospels, the cementing of Jesus' identity, a bolster theologically, and finally how Mary in the midst of all of her circumstances embodies hope.

Our scripture this morning is very Luke centric. The only other gospel that has this birth narrative is Matthew. Matthew's perspective is geared towards a Jewish audience while Luke's is towards a gentile. Mark was written at a time when there were eyewitness contemporaries to Jesus and His life. The necessity to answer where Jesus came from wasn't nearly as important as communicating the content of His ministry and redemptive work on the cross. John, on the other hand we've noted often is a more spiritual, theological, symbolic gospel and values Jesus' divinity and cosmic presence above His earthy birth.

Matthew, and Luke on the other hand are written at a time likely about one to two decades removed from Mark, when eyewitnesses would have been dwindling, Luke notes at the introduction of his gospel that he is communicating something handed down to himself and others from eyewitnesses. At this point there are now people being born into the faith, not just adult converts. So the natural curiosity from someone removed from that actual lifetime of Jesus would be "where did He come from?" Matthew and Luke, each in their own way, seek to answer this question in their writing.

Matthew is far more concise than Luke. This makes sense as the Jewish community would be prone to the prophecies and traditions that predict the coming Messiah. Mary is far less present in the story than in Luke. In fact her becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit takes one verse. The rest of what fleshes out that reality is centered around Joseph. Matthew gives one half of the picture while Luke completes it in his own gospel to give us a much broader scope, and also answers questions on a greater scale.

For Jewish man, two anticipated questions are answered. What kind of idiot believes his fiancé when she shows up pregnant and claims that God did it? Given the scandal that would likely erupt should a woman become pregnant, particularly not to the betrothed man, before marriage, how could Joseph have married her after such a public disgrace?

Matthew answers these things for his audience by communicating details that are beyond just the miraculous event. He discloses that because of Joseph's character, he doesn't indulge a more spiteful sense of self. This spares him having to backpedal later. God's message in a dream affirms that Joseph's choice to still honor the betrothal isn't only sensible, it's a divine command.

Matthew, writing to the Jews in the story also affirms that Jesus has come to the gentiles as well given that his narrative incorporates the Magi, the men from afar who come to honor the newborn king.

Luke completes the picture with more details for the gentile audience. Remember, Luke is thought to have travelled with Paul, the apostle to the gentiles.

Luke includes the shepherds, likely Jews, affirming their incorporation into the new covenant. He also takes much more time telling the story, which would be important to people not privy in their own culture and tradition to the Messianic prophecies and traditions.

Luke's focus on Mary and a much more elevated sense of the virgin birth leads us to the next layer. Jesus' identity. In a pagan culture, there was awareness of other ancient traditions. Jesus to them was not the first figure to have been born of a virgin. But the detail is significant. To be born of a virgin, immediately confers a sense of divinity. So more than just sharing an event, Luke is also making sure that from the beginning of his gospel, his audience knows that this is important. The figure he writes about carries tremendous weight because He is divine, and His mission in the world divinely inspired. Luke cements Jesus as God incarnate in a way that John does not. He gives divine origin in the conception, and a clear message that heaven has come to earth in a real, personal way through the birth of a child.

The combination of Matthew and Luke bring a completeness to the story. The thoroughness of Luke very much heightens, demonstrates, and elevates Jesus' identity.

Now theology. Specifically doctrine.

Church doctrine doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. We often think that certain ideas have always been because that have been around for so long. Keep in mind that fully formed and orthodox doctrine couldn't really happen until there was a formed hierarchy and sense of leadership within the faith. Many of the things we consider truth didn't get that status until the mid to late 300s at the earliest. Why? Because it wasn't until this time that the church had formed hierarchy sufficient to make foundational statements and stands on belief.

This doesn't mean the beginnings of doctrine weren't swirling around beforehand. It just means that they didn't get the formal "stamp of approval" until later. An example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. The co-equal, three part Godhead all made of the same "substance".

As late as 325, the council of Niceae met in part to determine if a man named Arius was correct in his sense that Jesus was not co-eternal with God, but rather made out of God. This is a Christmas appropriate story, as St. Nicholas, one of the bishop's present, was so outraged by this claim that in the course of the meeting walked up and whacked Arius in the face and was tossed in the jail located on the premises.

The Nicene Creed twice references that Jesus was begotten, and that He was begotten, not made, in response to this controversy. Nevertheless, the matter wasn't settled until the Council of Constantinople in 381.

The point here being that doctrine takes time. One of the doctrines swirling around the early church yet not confirmed until much later is that of Original Sin. It began with an interpretation of Paul, and kept moving forward. It picked up it's greatest doctrinal head with Augustine, who lived in the 300s.

The story of the virgin birth satisfies a very real theological issue as well. If Original Sin is imparted through the birthing, largely because of the conceiving, the sense of the virgin birth deals successfully with the issue. Why is this important? It is important because it throws forward to the crucifixion. If Jesus is to be the perfect atoning sacrifice, He must be devoid of any sin, including original sin.

The meaning of the virgin birth narrative communicates the thoroughness of the gospels, affirms the identity of Christ, and satisfies the reality of a sinless savior. But there's more.

Listen to Mary's song. Consider it in her own context. She calls herself blessed, and expresses gratitude for her chosen role. Think about her circumstance. We know she's been jilted by Joseph. We know he relented, but we have no detail about how long it took, what the time frame was between the dream and the reconciliation. We know she got shipped off to her relatives when she was found pregnant. She was shamed. She was deemed "less than" and sent away to hide the shame of both her and her family.

Sadly, this isn't a "then and there thing". I know of a young lady who got pregnant young, out of wedlock. She was sent away to other family. Why? From what I gathered, in large part to their faith community, they knew the shame she would bring on herself and her family. So send her away while she was showing.

How shameful that a faith community couldn't rally around her? Yet here we are. This is within the last 10 years. Here, however, despite public shame and criticism, she calls herself "blessed". She recognizes that the hope of the world will come from her. She sees her part in the story. She realizes who she is, and whom she is about to birth. So despite her harsh circumstances, while everyone else may see her as cursed, or sinful, or ungodly, she sees herself as blessed.

She has hope. Not in herself, but the child within. She has hope that if she fulfills her part in the story, God will fulfill something greater.

And so God does. The hope of the world comes into being through Mary. The redemption of the world comes into being through Mary.

And for us, what does that leave? It is far more than our own personal redemption. Certainly we have this through Christ, from whom Mary came. But this hope. This birth. It's not only limited to Mary.

Jesus' physical birth only happened once. It CAN only happen once. Yet the spiritual Advent happens each and every day. Every day a person of faith spreads joy, peace, love, redemption, compassion, Jesus is reborn in Spirit. Each time His Spirit is exemplified in a disciple and embraced by another not only is it reborn and renewed, it is uplifted and embraced again. And it goes on.

We have this hope. We are called to exemplify and multiply this hope. The circumstances of our world are strange. No stranger than Mary's. Like Mary, we are called to bear whatever stigmas the world may throw at us for the benefit of conveying the hope of Jesus.

Few of us have had to endure what she did. Few of us have endured the genuine persecution of the early church. Yet all of us are called to speak, live, and endure the genuine gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.

We do so because the hope of Christ is not only the hope of Mary, the hope of you and I, it is the hope of the world.

## BIBLE STUDY John 8

As we go into Chapter 8, it's important to keep in mind that this is very much an extension of chapter 7. In fact, we see multiple places where the arguments and statement made are echoing statements made previously. Jesus is still in Jerusalem, He's been teaching and discussing in the Temple, and the day after the feast again He appears at the Temple to teach and discuss with the people and Pharisees.

The first piece is a story that is one of the most famous in scripture. It's even quoted by people who don't ascribe to the Christian faith. "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Yet these verses do not appear in the oldest, most authentic manuscripts of the gospel of John. This isn't to say these verses aren't valid. Rather it suggests that there is a reason they were dropped in later, but caution needs to be taken when using this scene to interpret other parts of John as it doesn't necessarily flow with the gospel as originally written, and we've seen many times already where John plays back and forth with itself to help us see a bigger picture.

Jesus' opponents are trying to test Him hear, continually looking to find some reason to accuse and arrest Him. They bring a woman "caught in adultery" before Him asking what should be done as the Law says she should be stoned. Here we see a pattern beginning with the Pharisees. In fact, Nicodemus points it out in chapter 7.

It takes two to be adulterous. Technically the man should be there to be punished as well. We also see them looking to arrest and condemn on the spot, where the "policy" is that some kind of hearing must be held and witnesses produced before any kind of condemnation occurs. Jesus points out their hypocrisy earlier when he harass Him for healing a man on the Sabbath, yet they themselves perform the work of circumcision on the Sabbath, also breaking that commandment. Simply put, in the process of seeking to condemn Jesus for breaking the rules, they themselves have no problem with breaking whatever rules are convenient.

This is a caution for all of us. Obsession can lead us to break our own rules if it furthers our end cause. This lends a lot of discredit to what we do, even if we succeed, because it's stained with doing the very thing we're accusing someone else of doing. The more power and status someone has, the greater the temptation to do this. Why? Because the more the temptation to believe it can be gotten away with. Integrity isn't just the outcome, it's also how that outcome is achieved.

Back to the story, as they come at Him questioning, Jesus' response is one of incredible disinterest. Much has been made of what Jesus was writing in the sand, but this is truly irrelevant. Jesus kneeling down and doodling is essentially saying to these people "I really don't sweat you", which must be infuriating. His response "you without sin...." convicts these officials and they skulk away. Meanwhile, this woman who has been bullied, shamed, and humiliated He forgives and sets her off with a clean slate and a new lease on life.

The big picture here demonstrates something about the very nature of Jesus. His words and presence are not only authoritative, but they set things in the correct light. The high and mighty have forgotten their past and feel entitled to pass judgment. Jesus uses that past to convict them in the present with the hope that this will get them moving in the right direction and change their hearts. It is a hard but real mirror held up to them. He then forgives this woman in the present, hoping and helping her to realize she is a person of worth and innate dignity, for the purpose of sending her into a better and stronger future.

He then continues to engage those gathered around.

First he declares Himself the Light of the world, the light of life. This statement shows us how Jesus continues to use the imagery at hand to try and communicate spiritual truth. When he was at the well with the woman He used water. When the disciples came bringing food He used bread. After He fed the 4,000 with bread He used yeast. Here, at the Feast of Tabernacles there were four huge lampstands that threw out enough light that some say you could see it from all over Jerusalem. So He uses this image that everyone there would have recognized as a reference point. Naturally, they still don't get it.

The arguments are now getting more terse, which means the message should be coming clearer. They accuse Him of being invalid in His personal testimony because He has no one to back Him up. Previously Jesus had cited John the Baptist, His works, scripture, and even Moses as witnesses to His identity. Here He simply says that the Father is His second witness. He equates Himself with the Father. Almost anticipating their response, He is clear that they don't know the Father and therefore don't know Him, and of course vice versa. Nor do they know where He comes from. As if intentionally dense, they respond with "where is your father?"

In the midst of this, however, Jesus says something odd. He says that He judges no one, yet if He does His judgment is valid. How can He not judge yet judge? How can He come "not to condemn the world but to save it", yet because of Him people stand condemned?

Allow an illustration. Have you ever been in a dark place in your life where your thoughts, your heart, your choices are pointed in the wrong direction? Then an incredibly saintly person comes into your presence? How do you feel at that point? For me, even if they have no idea where I'm at on the inside, I feel incredibly small. I feel convicted. I feel condemned. It's not them, it's me. All they have done is born witness to who I should be striving to be just by who they are. The rest happens in my heart.

The question then is "then what?" Do I allow that moment to turn me towards the light or do I continue to spiral towards the darkness? Do I allow my heart to engage or disengage Jesus? In that choice, I choose forgiveness or condemnation. I make that decision on my own behalf. Jesus on the other hand has only the desire to redeem and save.

Jesus by His life and witness makes all of us seem dim by comparison. Just because the contrast is so stark. Yet He also in His boundless love wants to and is willing to forgive us. The question is never whether or not we've reached perfection. The question is always whether or not we are stepping forward and moving closer to it day by day.

In this chapter, He is trying to move these people a step closer to Him. They seem to be moving the opposite direction.

His discussion about testimony has fallen on deaf ears, so Jesus moves to His origin and destination. "Where I am going you cannot follow". "I am from above, you are from below." All of this is pointing them heavenward. He is revealing divine origin and destination. They still don't get it, and reveal a hardness of heart in their speculation.

In chapter 7, they wondered if Jesus was going to go and teach the Jews in Greece. This assumes something noble. He is going to give others the benefit of His wisdom. Here, they wonder if He is talking about suicide. There is nothing in Jesus' that suggests He is exhibiting any of the signs that He is in the sort of emotional or mental distress that would lead Him to this end. So the assumption must be that He is very much intending to offend and affront God. In Jewish culture at this time, to commit suicide was such that one would not be given a proper burial and assumed to be sent to the lowest realm of Hades, the land of the dead. This is more than a question, it is a statement of how they view Jesus character.

As they continue to misunderstand, Jesus uses the term "lifted up" once again to project forward to His crucifixion. He points the finger at those gathered that "YOU will lift me up". He also projects that it is in that act that they will finally see Him for who He is. It's important to remember here that this statement seems like He is saying that when He is on the cross they will "get it." What this is truly implying is that the crucifixion will begin the unfolding of events that over time will open their eyes.

We know this just by looking at the disciples. Even they didn't understand fully the crucifixion until after the resurrection. It didn't fully register what that meant for their future until they were given the Great Commission at the ascension. If it took Jesus' closest companions this long to sort it out, certainly it would take His enemies even longer. Once again, however, this isn't a critique so much as recognizing reality and our humanity. Each of us take time to assimilate new information. Each of us move at an individual pace. The key point is what direction that pace takes us. At this point we see that some are starting to believe in Him. It's to these people the conversation now turns. We might assume that the harsher back and forth would soften here. It doesn't.

Jesus first tries to move them a bit further. He talks about His words residing in them. He talks about following His word. He issues the famous statement that they will know the truth and the truth will set them free. Earlier He had already made the statement that those who refuse Him will die in their sin. Here He is trying to give them the key to being freed from not only their sin but the consequences of it.

Particularly in our current time, we need to unpack this statement honestly because it has been grossly misused. "Freedom" here is directly connected to truth. The truth is that Jesus is our divine redeemer. The freedom is a spiritual condition. We have had our eyes opened to the sin in our lives, we are striving away from it, and in our faith and transformation participate in the grace that forgives that sin.

It is not an affirmation of any national sensibilities of freedom or rights. That is a separate issue entirely and not implied in this scripture at all. In fact, to apply this scripture as such is a different version of the same mistake the listeners in this passage make. It confuses the spiritual with the worldly. In the process, affirming worldly freedom can be used as an excuse to actually do things that are the opposite of what Jesus would have us do. This is not Jesus affirming our right to act as we please because we are free. Quite the opposite, it is freeing us from sin so that we can restrain our worldly freedom so that we act in unison with Jesus as we love one another.

The people here, rather than making this mistake, focus on the earthly institution of slavery. Having never been enslaved themselves, they are confused and cite their heritage through Abraham.

At this point we see that whatever “belief” they must have had was likely shallow and/or fleeting. Jesus then points out what is clearly a significant obstacle to authentic faith. They are looking to kill Him, and their hearts are closed to genuinely hearing and understanding His words. He calls them out that claiming to be children of Abraham is a false claim because they do not honor Abraham in how they are accepting the words of God being offered to them.

Abraham, we remember, was given a promise from God as well as directions on how and where to accomplish the promise. Hebrews tells us that Abraham “believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.” He believed, and he followed. He may not have always gotten things correct, but he continued forging ahead and following God. These people are not as open or willing to receive the words of God being offered. Let alone follow them.

They entrench further and then make the claim that Jesus Himself has made. “God is our father.”

Clearly not getting what Jesus is trying to say at this point, Jesus goes even further telling them that their father is the devil. He’s already noted they are looking to kill Him. The devil, a murderer from the beginning, is their father. Jesus is the truth, and continually sharing with them the truth of God. They refuse to believe Him, run Him down, and oppose Him. In other words, they embrace the lie even in the face of authentic truth. The devil, the father of lies, is their father.

Harsh as it seems, Jesus is trying to get through to them that they are deceived and mistaken. Sadly, rather than let this shock them to their senses, they continue to dig in and respond harshly.

Once again, isn’t this an unfortunate human reality? We have long held assumptions about what is correct. We have status or wealth or power that we are accustomed to. We have values, beliefs, and such that we have been told are right. Then someone comes along and challenges any of this. The natural reaction is to argue back. The natural reaction may even be to experience anger. But if the challenge is true, right, and correct, it doesn’t matter how long or tightly we hold on to our own sensibilities. Truth is still truth. Truth doesn’t change because we believe something else hard enough.

The process of changing and processing truth that flies in the face of what we think we know is hard. It can be painful. It is also necessary. Our search continually should be to find truth, and when it stares us in the face accept it and change our sensibilities in light of the truth as opposed to warping the truth to fit our sensibilities.

There is great wisdom and tragedy in an expression that very much echoes Jesus’ statement “yet because I tell you the truth you do not believe me.” We might say “if you believe a lie long enough the truth will sound crazy.”

In another instance of back and forth echoing, the people being spoken to respond. Jesus has said He comes from the Father, referring to God. They have said “God is our father.” Jesus has said their father is the devil. They now say Jesus has a demon.

Jesus’ response is that all He is doing is to glorify God. This, we know to be true. Everything He has done and said has been to point them to a redemptive relationship with God. In His own divinity, He uses that authority ultimately to point them heavenward so that their relationship with God can be right and correct. He offers them a wonderful gift, that accepting the truth will lead them to eternal life. They think He is crazy. This claim is ludicrous. All of their great ancestors have tasted death. How on earth could He promise such a thing.

Once again, they grossly misunderstand and are focused on the worldly while He is trying to teach them something of heaven.

Through this discussion, Jesus has made several statements referring to Himself as “I am.” This is clearly Him identifying Himself as the divine. They haven’t picked up on it yet. Whether they were just missing it, or intentionally dense, Jesus makes a statement that puts the spotlight on it. He claims to know Abraham, and answering the question of “how?” responds with “before Abraham was, I am.”

This drives it absolutely home. And they lose their minds. This is blasphemy. They are so upset that the chapter ends where it began, with an attempted stoning. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus steps in to stop the punishment. Here there is no one for Him. So He flees.

Chapter 7 and 8 taken together show us a boldness to Jesus in trying to persuade His people to believe in Him. At great risk given the forming plot to kill Him He goes right into the heart of the ones seeking to do Him harm. His attempts meet with mixed results. Some believe, some reject, some split the difference identifying Him as a prophet. Ultimately, at the end of each chapter, the result is that for whatever success He has had in persuading some to believe, He has equally succeeded in angering those seeking His demise. The Pharisees in chapter 7 are clearly incensed. The gathering in 8 seeks to stone Him.

Perhaps this is the question for each of us. Do we choose the risk of siding with Jesus? Or do we choose the convenience and comfort of siding with those who would rather live the ease of the lie rather than be transformed by the truth?