

Virgin Birth



Christian tradition has always emphasized that Jesus was born of a virgin. The Messiah could only come forth from a virgin's womb. The main reason for this emphasis of course is to highlight that Jesus did not have a human father and that his conception was from the Holy Spirit.

But there is often a secondary emphasis as well, less-founded in scripture. Too common within that notion is the idea that Jesus was born from a virgin because somehow sexuality is impure, that it is too base and earthy to have a connection to such a sacred event. The holy must be kept separate from what is base. Jesus wasn't just born of a virgin because he did not have a human father; he was also born of a virgin because his birth demanded a purity that, by definition, rules out sex. Our concept of the virgin birth has been infiltrated by a piety which, for all kinds of reasons, cannot accord sexuality to the holy.

What's wrong with this? Beyond denigrating the God-given goodness of sexuality, it misses one of the major aspects of revelation within the virgin birth. There is a moral challenge within the virgin birth, something which invites imitation rather than admiration.

Christian tradition emphasizes a virgin birth (just as it emphasizes a virgin burial, a virgin tomb to parallel the virgin womb) not because it judges that sexuality is too impure and earthy to produce something holy. Rather, beyond wanting to emphasize that Jesus had no human father, the Christian tradition wants to emphasize what kind of heart and soul is needed to create the space wherein something divine can be born. What is at issue is not celibacy rather than sex, but patience rather than

impatience, reverence rather than irreverence, respect rather than disrespect, and accepting to live in tension rather than capitulating and compensating in the face of unrequited desire. A virgin's heart lets love unfold according to its own dictates rather than manipulating it. A virgin's heart lets gift be gift rather than somehow, however subtly, raping it. A virgin's heart accepts the pain of inconsummation rather than sleeping with the bride before the wedding. That, in the end, is what constitutes virginal space, the space within which God can be born.

Thirty years ago, trying to express this, I wrote poem entitled, Virgin Birth. Today I blush at the youthful idealism in that poem; but, on my better days, I take counsel from the young man who wrote those lines:

Virgin Birth

*The perennial paradox, peculiar to this Father and Son
Specialists in confounding human wisdom withdrawn from wonder.
A virgin gives birth, not to sterility, but to a Messiah.
What has virginity to do with giving birth? Nothing!
When wisdom wastes words wandering towards a truth that will not set us free.
Virginity and inconsummation: Incomplete heart and flesh,
wrestle with a God who has no flesh
who won't let flesh meet flesh
ache, awaiting completeness
to stave off sterility, truly the unforgivable sin against the spirit of life.
But sterility becomes pregnant with yearning for the spirit that sleeps with God at night and
impregnates with messianic spirit those patient enough to yearn and sweat lonely tears
rather than ruin gift
with impatience.
Only virgins' wombs bring forth messiahs because they alone live in advent
waiting a delaying bridegroom
late, hopelessly beyond the eleventh hour.
Still the virgin's womb waits
Refusing all counterfeit lovers and impatience
which demand flesh on flesh and
a divine Kingdom on human terms.*

*Messiahs are only born
in virginity's space
within virginity's patience
which let God be God and
love be gift.*

Why a virgin's womb for a Messiah's birth? Why an obsession with purity within the Christian tradition? Because, as we all know only too well, our lives are full of most everything that is not virginal or pure: impatience, disrespect, irreverence, manipulation, cynicism, grandiosity; and, as we all know too, within this matrix no messiah can be gestated.

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