

## A Wisdom Journey

If you are brand new to Ordinary Life, welcome. If you have been attending, as some of you have, for decades, welcome. I want these times to contribute to and initiate consequential conversations about what is really happening and what matters most.

I have been speaking to how we are in this wonderful, liminal time when one story of who we are and how we are to be is coming to an end. There is a new story to live into but we are not there yet. I'm not there. And, I'm just assuming that you are not either. We are in this really weird space of knowing that how we are going about things isn't working. It isn't working because it isn't working for everybody. As the true saints of every tradition have said in hundreds of different ways, as long as anyone is treated unjustly, we are not living in a just world. Yet, at the same time, we are fearful of what is next.

More and more people do not believe we are on the right track. Simply being aware of that doesn't change anything. We can be aware, for example, that there is racial injustice in this country. That awareness alone doesn't change it.

The fundamental precept of the new story that we have not yet lived into is that we are inseparable from everything that is and everyone who is. This is a fundamental teaching of Jesus. But, because of excesses and abuses done by organized Christianity over the centuries, it is hard for Jesus to get a hearing. So, other people are taking up a way to tell the new story and cutting it off from religion. Which, of course, is somewhat of a violation that everything is one.

Those of you who get Richard Rohr's daily meditations, and if you don't I highly recommend them to you, know that he is currently speaking to what he calls the "perennial tradition." Truth is not confined to one religion. To make that claim is to participate so much in the old story as to make the new one that wants to come virtually impossible for many people.

I want to point you to three other sources for the new story.

First, and both of these two books I want simply to make you aware of have been gifted to me by people who attend Ordinary Life, is a collection of essays by Charles Eisenstein titled, “The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible.”

Second, a magnificent work by Terry Patten titled “A New Republic of the Heart.” It is called “a guide to inner work for holistic change.” The foreword is by Andrew Harvey who is, in my humble opinion, one of the true Christian mystics of our time. (I’m putting a link here so that you can follow up on this very rich resource for spiritual awareness and growth on your own - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew\\_Harvey\\_\(religious\\_writer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Harvey_(religious_writer)) )

The third resource, and I could mention many, is Michael Dowd. His book, “Thank God for Evolution,” is really leading a forward march into the new story. By the way, not only is Michael Dowd coming here but also in these first two books I mentioned, he is acknowledged as a resource. I am truly beginning to think that there is no one Dowd doesn’t know. Dowd calls himself an “evidential mystic.” When he cites what is core to his faith he says, “Reality is my God and evidence is my scripture. Integrity is my salvation and doing whatever I can to foster a just and healthy future for the full community of life is my mission.” We could use some of that in our world right now.

Before we can live ourselves into a new story, we must navigate ourselves out of the old. One of the ways I have been doing this is by looking at the way Jesus and an understanding of the Christian religion has been hijacked by Christian Fundamentalism. My hunch is that for the vast majority of people in this culture who would claim to know anything about Christianity, what they would tell you they know, whether they are involved in any church are not, would be some version of the tenets of Christian Fundamentalism. I remind you what these are:

The Bible is the literal, inerrant Word of God.

Jesus was literally born of a virgin.

Substitutionary atonement is the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross. (The word “atone” is a contraction of the words “at one.”)

The miracles in the New Testament are real. They literally happened.

Jesus rose physically from the grave, ascended literally into the sky and will return someday in the “second coming.”

For the past several talks in here I talked about the first: that the Bible is NOT the literal, inerrant Word of God and that to approach the Sacred writings of any religion that way is the worst way to approach them. I’m sure that in talking about the rest of the “fundamentals” that we will continue to stress that the writings in the Bible, after being seen through the eyes of contemporary scholarship, are to be taken metaphorically. The Bible is a lens we see through, not an object we stare at and stop there.

What I’m going to turn my attention now is the second of the “fundamentals” of Christian Fundamentalism. This is the one that states that Jesus was literally born of a virgin.

I want to do a biblical reconstruction of this so-called doctrine. It will actually be more of a deconstruction. And, then, get to what the metaphorical meaning of the “virgin birth” story is all about. How and why did it get put into the tradition? This will take a while. As we go forward keep what I’ve said so far about the Bible and how to read it in mind. You can go back and find these presentations on the Ordinary Life website.

Keep two other things in mind as well.

First, is a quote from John Dominic Crossan that I love:

“My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are not smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.”

Second, something new is in fact seeking to be born into our consciousness. To put this from a non-dual perspective, the new story is already here and has been from the beginning. We are just beginning, hopefully, to grow into an apprehension of it. This non-dual way of speaking is one of the things I mean by quantum theology or an evolutionary spirituality.

All of this being said, let's begin to talk about what is known in the Christian faith as "the virgin birth." Every week millions of Christians all over the world recite one or another version of a creed that affirms:

"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary . . ."

What in the world did, does, might this mean?

Further, if you type in the phrases "images of the virgin Mary" or "icons of the virgin Mary" "Mary of the Immaculate Heart," into your search engine, you will find thousands of images.

We are not, of course, going to be able to get through all of this today. We can get a start - with your keeping those key things in mind.

The teachings about Jesus that began developing around the 3rd and 4th centuries and after this have ironically contributed to people being unable to see Jesus. What has gotten attention are teachings about Jesus.

I'm going to hazard the guess that most of us have been taught, inherited or somewhere led to believe that "believing in Jesus" would somehow save us from the fires of hell.

I have a friend who is in the active process of dealing with a life-threatening illness. He told me the other day that another friend of his, who knows about his condition, wants to come from another state and visit with him. Not to reminisce and say goodbye but, rather, to make sure my friend has accepted Jesus as his personal savior. I used to believe that. It was what I was taught.

Now I understand that what Jesus saves us for is for himself and his plan in making God's dream for us and this world come true.

In our time and culture religion has largely become a spectator sport where people argue about who is right. I don't want my religious and/or spiritual energy spent

like that. What I want in following Jesus, and you'll have to say for yourself what you are looking for, is to be affected in the same way that his first followers were. Which is to apprehend God in this man and his teachings and to experience transformation in my life here and now. To have that kind of joy, and love, and fearlessness. That what Jesus was and is about has been or could be reduced to five distorted teachings that promise to be the surefire plan for prosperity here and safety forever is such a perversion.

While we are dealing with the teaching about the virgin birth I want to spend perhaps an entire talk on defining who Jesus was. Suffice it to say for now that however else Jesus is to be understood, the first word to describe him would be as a "wisdom teacher." Jesus was a Jew in the prophetic and wisdom tradition of Judaism. Wisdom is not concerned with theories of sin and salvation. Wisdom is concerned with how to cope with life. One of the things it means to follow Jesus is to grow in wisdom.

In order to grow in wisdom about the Jesus story we will have to begin in gaining knowledge and information about the Jesus story.

Sometime during the Advent Season here at St. Paul's there is a "Children's Candle Lighting Service." It is one of those "standing-room-only" events. Which simply means that you have to come early if you want a seat.

It is a hoot. Over a hundred children participate. There are angels, shepherds, wise men, Joseph, the Virgin Mary, animals - camels, sheep, lambs, cows. Most of you have attended an event like that. Or, seen something like it on television.

These pageants are so deeply embedded in our minds and memories that we simply accept as true that they are representative of factual events. Surely the church wouldn't lie to us.

Well, the fact is that those pageants are the result of squashing together the only two birth stories we have in the Christian collection and the addition of some fanciful fiction that has been added over the years. There are, for example, no camels in the story anywhere.

There are only two accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Christian writings and they significantly contradict each other. There is no birth story in Mark, which is the earliest of the four narratives we have. And, no birth story in John, which is the latest written. Paul, whose writings precede anything else in the collection never mentions the birth.

In Matthew's account Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee into Egypt immediately after the birth and stay there for a couple of years. In Luke's account, Jesus was incorporated into the Jewish tradition by being circumcised on the eighth day, presented in the temple forty days after that and, then, with Joseph and Mary makes his leisurely way back to their home in Nazareth.

Matthew has the story of the wise men with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Luke has shepherds.

Someone has conjectured that if it had been three wise woman instead of three so-called wise men, they would have asked directions instead of following the star. They would have arrived on time, helped deliver baby Jesus, cleaned the stable, brought practical gift like pampers, feeding bottles, baby clothes & made milk for the new baby...etc.

Not only does John have no birth story - by the time John is written, it has disappeared - but also on two occasions in John Jesus is referred to simply as "the son of Joseph."

No where else in the entire Bible is there reference to the birth of Jesus. All we have are two deeply contradictory narratives in two separate books.

So, the first step in our understanding the meaning of the Virgin Birth tradition is to take the time to note exactly what the Bible says about the origins of Jesus. It is not what most of us have been taught.

The old story that we are moving away from, like it or not, does not let us go easily. In any of its parts. But, let someone question or challenge one of the five Christian Fundamentals and a kind of panic sets in. I have had people in this gathering say to me that they have told people about Ordinary Life and about my

teaching. “You should come.” “Well, I don’t know. Does he believe in the virgin birth?” It is a litmus test.

So, let me be clear. There is not a chance that any of the birth details in either Matthew or Luke are either accurate or literally true. The data to support what I am saying is overwhelming.

Stars are masses of burning gas. The nearest star to the earth is our sun which is a mere 8.5 light minutes away from earth - that’s 93 million miles. The next nearest stars are around 4.3 light years away from the earth. To think of one coming close enough to function as a GPS is absurd.

Angels do not break through the midnight sky to sing to hillside shepherds. Shepherds do not go in search of a divine child with so little information especially in a city that is crowded with visitors drawn by a decree from the Roman emperor. Besides, there is no evidence that such a decree was ever given and can you imagine the chaos that would ensure if it were?

Virgins do not conceive. And, if they do in one religion, you have to allow that to be true for all religions that make such a claim and there are many.

In Matthew there is the claim that a prophecy from Isaiah has come true in the conception of Jesus. In Hebrew the text in Isaiah does not read, “Behold a virgin will conceive.” What it says is, “Behold, a woman is with child.” The two are not the same.

Everybody knows the nursery rhyme “Humpty Dumpty.”

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.  
All the king’s horses and all the king’s men,  
Couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Who is Humpty Dumpty? The answer is, we think, is an egg. But, nowhere in the rhyme is an egg mentioned. We’ve just been led by illustrations in story books to assume it is an egg.

Go back and read the birth stories. No stable is mentioned anywhere. No innkeeper is ever referred to. No camels on which the wise men ride ever appear. There is no reference to there being three in number. We've just sung "We Three Kings" so long that we have inserted them into the story.

As I said, many people are shocked to learn these facts. These fictions remain part of our consciousness because they are constantly re-enforced by Christmas cards with angels singing to hillside shepherds on them, with a man on a camel looking up at a star, with a strong silent male standing behind a kneeling mother watching an infant lying in an animals' feeding trough. We sing carols that re-enforce the story. Then we hear information like I'm offering today and it is disturbing. Hang on. When someone asks you if I or you believe in "the virgin birth," I want you to be able to say, "Yes. But, at a mystical and mysterious level that the original metaphorical story was meant to convey." That ought to give them pause.

I just want to be clear before we go forward that the earliest biblical writers of what became Christian scripture apparently never had heard about Jesus having had a miraculous birth. Paul never mentions it. Indeed Paul says only that Jesus was "born of a woman, born under the law." That's Jewish lingo for saying that Jesus was fully Jewish. The only other reference to Jesus origins in Paul comes in Romans where Paul says this about Jesus: "His descent from David roots him in history." (1:3)

For Mark it was at Jesus' baptism, not his conception, that God's spirit entered him. Later in Mark's gospel it is said that Jesus' mother comes with Jesus' brothers to seize Jesus because "they suspected he was getting carried away with himself." That is, that he was nuts. A woman who had the belief that she had given birth to the son of God would likely not act like that.

By the first part of the fourth century, however, the story of Jesus' special birth had been enshrined in the Nicene Creed and began to play a part in the great theological debates.

The virgin birth is a myth. But myths contain truth. They are never literally true. They are truer than true. So what is the truth embedded in the virgin birth story?



There is a divide among many people when it comes to either Christianity or to following Jesus in our time. Many people look at what it means to be Christian, according to Christian Fundamentalism, and say, “If that is what it means to be Christian, I want no part of it.” So, they are gone. Out the door. They join the growing ranks of the “church alumni.” Part of the struggle for many who do still remain faithful to organized forms of Christian worship is that, though the services may meet numerous emotional and social needs, there is something that seems out of step. I’ve had numerous people say things to me like, “You are ruining ‘big church’ for me.” Or, “How can you believe what you believe and still say the creed?” I intend to address this fully some day. Perhaps talks like this will contribute to an answer.

Borrowing from the influential figure in my life, Carl Jung, I would offer this:

My goal is not to believe the creed but to understand it, not to believe in “the virgin birth” but to understand it.

There is a huge difference between the arena of information and knowledge and that of wisdom and understanding. We are on a wisdom journey following a wisdom teacher.

Those who created and crafted the Jesus story fit it into the scope of their world view that reflected their era and culture. They wrote creeds and, then, said that these creeds were so authoritative that they could not be changed. We have to move beyond this prohibition if we are to bring our most authentic selves into the teachings of Jesus.

There is no doubt in my own mind as to the relevance of Jesus and his teachings for us. In the teachings of Jesus there are profound truths we can use to better understand ourselves, what we mean when we talk about God and how to relate to the created order. I am concerned about whether the various institutions that house Christian teachings are up for the task of embracing this relevancy. Just look at the push back the Pope is getting on abolishing the death penalty.

Further, there was an article in the current issue of the Christian Century (8/1/18, p. 9) about how the Episcopal Church is considering an overhaul of the Book of Common Prayer in order to make it clear that God is a being who transcends gender. The prayer book currently uses traditional language referring to God as king, father, Lord. The Prayer Book was last revised in 1979 and this change, if it occurs, will take ten years.

You may recall, I hope, that I recently spoke in here about the four unconscious archetypes that clutch at the throat of the church and our culture. The first one was that of patriarchy. (The other three were: a notion of a flawed creation, the need for obedience and submission, and a belief in redemptive violence.)

Clearly there are people who want to do this work. You are evidence of that. When you say or think that what I teach couldn't be taught in most churches, you give evidence of the role of rigid resistance to change. People who attend Rohr Conferences are signs of hope. Those books I mentioned earlier are signs of hope - but note that they are outside the province of organized religion.

If the real story and teachings of Jesus are to make it into this and the next century, we have to be about the business of truth seeking and relevance making. Seminaries and denominations must find ways to encourage people who are graduating from seminaries to reject the myth that "your congregation won't be ready for the truth about the Bible."

I look at the Jesus narratives, the creeds of the early church and the doctrines that have developed from them, as rather like time capsules that we can open and better understand the developing theological and political convictions of our ancestors. What happened in those ninety years that separate the writing of Mark from the composition of Matthew that causes the birth story to go from being starkly absent to being colorfully present? Was it a way to honor Mary? Perhaps.

Any way you look at it, human birth is a miracle. Those of you who are parents know this. We may think we know the mechanics of how a human being comes to exist in the stomach of another human being but when that human being emerges into the world and you hold it, you are looking into the face of God.

You and I share in an intimate experience of Jesus because we too first arrived here in the womb of another.

Birthing is a powerful religious and spiritual symbol. Each of us is called to give birth to, to create the values found in the teachings of Jesus into this world.

Jesus birth is miraculous to us for different reasons than it was to Matthew or Luke.

Next week I want to return with an expanded statement about the Jesus of history and his time. For now I'll put it like this. Jesus was born into a backwater place into a minority race into a demographic that was absolutely at the bottom of the economic and political ladder. He was what we would call a nothing, a nobody. The political system into which he was born was ruthless. Every historian about the time of Jesus can easily document Rome's brutal cruelty.

Yet, in that context Jesus stayed faithful to his ministry of compassionate action and inclusive love. Mary gave birth to Jesus and Jesus gave birth to a ministry and a legacy that has prompted generations of people to extend compassionate care for one another. This is our heritage. This is our opportunity. Creating is an act that is available to each of us. No exceptions.

A new understanding of the "virgin birth" can provide us spiritual energy as we resist the ills of our world today. A new interpretation of the virgin birth can focus us on creating with clear hearts and minds. In spite of what screams at us from the headlines, we can take Jesus as a role model not to be derailed from a path of compassion, peace, love and joy.

There are likely many ways to reinterpret the virgin birth of the Christ child. In my opinion what should bind these interpretations together is compassion and justice.

We are called to offer healing to a social enemy as the so-called Good Samaritan does to the injured man by the road.

And, we are equally to be ready to flip over tables where injustice has become a new norm.

So, if anyone should ask you if I believe in the virgin birth, the answer is yes.

I hope you will come to affirm a new understanding and living of it as well.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.