

“That’s Impossible”

Matthew 1:18-25

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The text of Matthew in our Gospel lesson begins in a very direct manner so as not to confuse our frail human minds. “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.” No room for interpretation or claiming Matthew to be confused and misunderstanding Isaiah’s prophecy—simply that this IS how it happened. And the reason I highlight that truth as I begin this morning is because what follows defies all manner of human reason. You can almost see this whole thing playing out in a 1990s style daytime talk show. “Joseph, you are NOT the father!” The rules of so-called “logic” would support the idea that this is all a farce and simply a cleverly concocted rouse from an unfaithful woman. You can almost hear the echoes of a young Luke Skywalker, “No...that’s not true....that’s impossible!” This account of the birth of Jesus highlights two very important realities of the faith: (1) your faith is doomed if left to your own reason, and (2) you cannot hope to understand the things of God unless the truth of them is revealed to you by God Himself.

Walking this life by way of your own understanding is how the world tries to make you do it, and they are getting really, really good at it. So much so that even the church in the world is succumbing to the temptation they constantly dangle in front of you. You are the source of knowledge, and the only one capable of finding the truth behind the lies. It happens all the time, and it happens every time the account of Jesus’ miraculous birth comes around. Their arguments always start the same way. “Make it make sense!” But isn’t that the whole problem with their approach? To this day, no one can find me the Scripture that says, “Submit the Word of the Lord to your own tests of reason, and if they pass, let them stand.” But even still, that is what the non-believing and self-righteous world want you to do. Reason above all instead of reason subject to God is contrary to everything the faith has taught the Christian.

I can, however find many Scripture accounts that prove the opposite of what they would have you believe. Proverbs 3:5 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.” Psalm 37:5, “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him and He will act.” Luke 24:45, “Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.” That’s just the tip of the iceberg, but I think everyone gets the gist. The Lord does not submit Himself to the logic of the frail human condition. You don’t have to make the faith make sense, all you must do is “believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved,” just as Paul and Silas proclaimed to the Philippian jailer in Acts 16. There was

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no commendation to the reasoning of the faith, and no necessary full comprehension of the mysteries of God. There was only faith in Jesus Christ as the source, means, and the end of salvation, and that is what the world is called to believe for their salvation as well.

Christians become disillusioned with the faith when they are told that it must be something more than just belief in Immanuel. More and more people are abandoning their faith because of the amount of “work” they are told they must do in order to be saved. And that is something that really cannot have any sense made out of it. Everything that has been revealed from the Word about faith in Christ is the total opposite of what those false teachers spew. There is no righteousness quota that must be reached and a level of holiness that you have to strive to attain. There is only Christ and His righteousness, and it is a righteousness that you have been given on account of His suffering and death. He came into the world to make you righteous, not to give you the ability to make yourself righteous.

The Lutheran confessors were battling this same heretical nonsense in their time, and so was Paul going back to the time of the Apostles. In Article XX of the Augsburg Confession, the confessors write:

The consciences of the pious will have no sufficiently sure consolation against the terrors of sin and of death, and against the devil soliciting to despair [and who in a moment blows away all our works like dust], if they do not know that they ought to be confident that they have the remission of sins freely for Christ’s sake. This faith sustains and quickens hearts in that most violent conflict with despair [in the great agony of death, in the great anguish, when no creature can help, yea, when we must depart from this entire visible creation into another state and world, and must die].

This is true today as much as it was for them. Works and self-righteous ideas about the faith have no place in the salvation that God has won for His people. Because it is His salvation, not yours. It is a gift that has been given to you on account of Jesus and for no other reason. By His blood shed on the cross, redemption has been won for you, and it is only and always that reason that you are in the faith. The Holy Spirit has quickened your heart and made you alive in the Spirit of Christ as He now dwells in you because of your baptism.

The faith is not a tool which you use to your advantage as you find ways to make your life on earth better. The faith is what sustains your soul unto eternity, so that you will stand in the presence of your Redeemer when you come into His heavenly kingdom. Faith in Christ, the Child born in the manger, cannot be reasoned or calculated. Faith is given as a gift, and it is that gift which brings the gifts that follow in the forgiveness of

sins. The only way to attain the knowledge of Christ and believe in the salvation He has won for all mankind is to have the truth revealed to you, just as it was to Joseph in our Gospel this morning.

Joseph was a man of faith. That is what it means when Matthew records that he was a “just man.” And being a man of faith, in adherence to the Law, he was ready to leave Mary and divorce her without bringing any shame upon her. It was his right to do so, but the mystery of the incarnation had not yet been revealed to him. When the angel of the Lord came to him, he was shown the truth of what you know only by the revelation of Scripture. Joseph was told that his betrothed was with child by the Holy Spirit, and he believed. You have been told that Mary was a virgin and that the child in her womb was conceived by the Holy Spirit as a miraculous gift from God. The gift He has given is none other than the gift of salvation, and so they call his name Jesus as the angel tells them to do, because He will save His people from their sins.

The beauty and consolation that truth brings to you is not because you understand it, but because you believe it. You believe it because you have been given the gift of faith in Christ and have received His grace and mercy for the sake of the Son of God who has come into the world. The continual assurance of that is given to you every time you gather around His continued gifts which He comes here to bring. In the Word spoken by the mouth of the Lord’s called servant, you hear that you are forgiven not of your own doing but because of the blood of Jesus. And you come to His table, where yet another unfathomable mystery of God takes place, and you receive the very real and true body and blood of your Savior for the forgiveness of your sins. You have not been called to understand your faith, you have been called to believe the Lord.

That is what the Apostle says in our Epistle lesson this morning when he says, “the Gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son...through whom we have received grace.” And the end of that faith is what we are gathered here during Advent to celebrate. Jesus, the one in whom we live, move, and have our very being, is coming in the flesh, but He is also coming again to bring peace to His people that will last for all eternity. There is no deciphering that one either. What we know is that He will come to judge the earth, the quick and the dead as we just confessed, and it will be the beginning of eternal joy. We get a foretaste of that joy when we gather for the Supper as heaven is opened to us and we eat of the Lord’s meal with the whole host of heaven, the angels and all the saints. No one can reason that of their own volition, and yet it is indeed what takes place here at this table. Revelation 19:9 tells us, speaking of all believers in Christ, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb...These are the true words of God.”

As we prepare for the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in the flesh on Christmas, look not only to the manger, but to the horizon of His second coming. Your reason can't comprehend not knowing the day or the hour, nor can it willingly prepare you as you wait for that day. Whether in this lifetime or after the day you are called home to be with Jesus, you must be ready for that day, and the only way to be prepared for His coming is your faith. It must be cared for and fed, strengthened and emboldened, and that only comes from the gift of the Spirit which He brings to you in Word and Sacraments. Remember your baptisms as you confess your sins before the Lord and receive the forgiveness He brings to you in His absolution. Eat and drink His very body and blood in His Holy Supper that He gives to you as a foretaste of the feast to come. Surround yourself not only with those whom you can see gathered here with you but with the whole host of angels and saints as the veil between heaven and earth is lifted in the Sacramental visitation of our Lord.

There is nothing that's impossible for your God, and the virgin birth of His only-begotten Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and given for your redemption, is certainly evidence of that truth. In a place where human logic defies the things of God, do not let yourself give in to the temptation to believe yourself before you believe Him. Just like Joseph as he prepared to divorce his wife for her seeming infidelity, believe the revelation of the Lord over all things. Trust only in Him. He has given you the gift of His truth, and there is nothing fallible in it. It is the most real thing that you can have in this world, whether or not you fully understand it. Do as Christ our Lord says in Matthew 6:33, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." His kingdom, which He comes to bring in His incarnation will be fully realized in His glorious return. Strengthened by His grace, wait with longing eyes to heaven, prepared for the coming of the Lord as He will reunite soul and body to dwell with Him in eternal bliss for all eternity. Amen.