

Conceiving a Vision
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Virginia Highland Church
Fourth Sunday of Advent – Conceive! – December 20, 2009
Texts: Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46b-55; Like 1:39-45

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As we consider today Mary's conception of the baby Jesus, I re-tell an old joke I overheard in the sauna of the gym I used to go to in West Hollywood. Old Jewish men, some of them with concentration camp numbers tattooed on their arms, would sit in the sauna spinning stories and telling jokes.

A priest, a minister, and a rabbi got into a heated discussion about when life begins, the moment when conception occurs. The priest spoke first, "Life begins when the egg is fertilized by the sperm, don't ya know." The minister disagrees, "No, life begins when the child is born." The rabbi expresses still another view, "No, no, no! Life begins when the kids leave home and the dog dies."

Please pray with me...

Anyone who has had a child or been a child knows that conception is more than the mere biological act of a sperm wriggling its way into an egg. A child's conception begins with adolescent daydreams of intimacy and raising a family. At its best, it begins with a twinkle in the parents' eyes, moments of ecstasy, months and then years of planning for the child's welfare and well-being, dreaming of who the child will be or become, investing in the child's future with education and recreation and a college fund. Life begins when the child is welcomed and loved and eventually honored as an independent being.

Our scriptures would have it that Mary, the mother of Jesus, like other mothers, conceived more than a child. She conceived a vision of her child as the one Micah and other prophets foretold, one who would turn oppression on its head, one who would bring justice to those who had more than their fair share and compassion to those who had less. A Jewish comedian likes to point out that this proves Jesus was Jewish, she says, for what Jewish son does not think his mother is a virgin and what Jewish mother does not think her son is a god?

For that matter, what child does not think her or his mother is perfect—at least, at first—and what mother does not think her child is divine—at least, at first? Babies, puppies, and kittens are all made cute by nature, I believe, to prompt our tender feelings toward them and, and our desire to care for them. We are born with the same-size eyes we will have in adulthood, and those big eyes in a little face are endearing, compelling us to protect such vulnerability.

Mothers too must have big eyes—not in circumference, but in their ability to see into the future. Will her home be big enough for this child? Will her life allow the time required to care for this child? Will what she takes into her body nourish or compromise the child's development? Will she be able to provide for this child? Fathers too must share this ability to see into the future.

Mary has Joseph to rely on, and early paintings of the nativity sometimes show her silent partner washing the baby's diapers as well as leading them away from King Herod's bloodthirsty slaughter of the innocents. But, according to our gospel text from Luke, Mary also has her cousin Elizabeth to share her vision, causing the child in *her* womb—John the Baptist—to leap for joy. Martin Luther used this illustration of John the Baptist leaping in his mother's womb to refute the Baptists, who opposed infant baptism!

Martin Luther also believed in the virgin birth, but said it wasn't a very big miracle, because, in his view, isn't every birth a miracle? Where do the little fingers come from? he asked. And the tiny feet?

Just as the baby Jesus would have difficulty finding room in his world to be born, so many babies born today have difficulty finding room in our world. If only every child could be welcomed as a divine emissary, a fulfillment of prophecy, a hope for the world! The model of Mary for our world today is not that of a virgin but the model of a mother's feelings for her child, one that would treasure all things related to him in her heart. Unlike those Christians of an earlier era that needed to see Jesus as other than a product of sexual intimacy, Christians today are on our way toward affirming the God-given nature of such intimacy. Thus whether Joseph was his biological father is irrelevant to our vision of Jesus, just as it surely was for Mary. For every conception holds divine possibility.

The first Sunday of Advent we talked about the spiritual life as “waiting patiently in expectation.” Mary waits patiently in expectation of the birth of a child that will transform the world. The second Sunday of Advent we talked of the need to discover or shape our own wilderness, that place empty of distractions or self-importance in which God may come to us. Mary opens such a place in herself, becoming a willing vessel in which God may be manifest. The third Sunday of Advent we spoke of the need to find a mantra or short prayer or scripture that joins the rhythm of our lives and thus bear fruit in our spiritual imagination. Mary’s prayer is “Let it be with me according to your word.” A wilderness is made welcoming by our willingness to be a place where God chooses to dwell, and fruitful by our openness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who plants a seed in the form of God’s word to us. And now, this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we recognize that what is conceived in us must be part of a broader vision for the world, just as Mary conceived a world transformed by her child.

Our reading from Micah declares, “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth one who is to rule...whose origin is of old.” And Mary proclaims, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant.” Notice the littleness, the lack of self-importance, in Bethlehem of Ephrathah, one of the little clans of Judah. Notice the self-proclaimed lowliness, the lack of self-importance, in Mary, a teenage mother. I believe that is in littleness, in the lowliness, in the lack of self-importance, in the loneliness and uncertainty of the wilderness, that visions are to be found for our world. That’s where the Israelites found The Promised Land. That’s where Mary found the promised Messiah. That’s where Jesus found the Kingdom of God.

“But you, O Baptist/UCC of Virginia Highland, who are one of the little churches of Atlanta, from you may come a vision whose origin is of old...” All of this is what we’ve been about in our transition period following the conclusion of a longterm pastorate, searching for a vision. At the behest of Parish Council, our education team met Thursday night to discuss what vision we have for the coming year. We know ourselves to be friendly, worshipful, pastoral, progressive, inclusive, and justice-seeking, and the question was, how to make that known in a slogan and a series of events in 2010 that draw people who can help us conceive a new thing for our church? Any ideas you have are welcome!

That night after the meeting I dreamed I was at a scientific conference explaining a theory of everything. I knew the answer, and on the podium in front of me were three reports that verified the scientific data that, integrated, revealed the theory. Now, I believe this dream was less a product of my ego than it was of the Benadryl I had taken to clear my sinuses. But it surely was related to the answer the education team had been seeking that night. What I discovered in my dream was that, though I knew the answer, I could not explain it. Nor could I prove it.

The next morning—Friday, the “wilderness day” during which I avoid all distractions except the morning papers until I finish the sermon—I read in *The New York Times* that a scientific test may have revealed though not proved the existence of dark matter. The article says, “Confirmation of the particles would also constitute the first evidence of a new feature of nature, called supersymmetry, that physicists have been seeking as avidly as the astronomers have been seeking dark matter. It is central to theoretical efforts like string theory, which unify all of the forces of nature into one mathematical expression” (“At a Mine’s Bottom, Tantalizing Hints of Dark Matter,” by Dennis Overbye, *New York Times*, Dec 16, 2009, p A31). Later in the article it says, “A wide range of astrophysical and cosmological measurements have subsequently converged on an intimidating recipe for the cosmos of 4 percent atoms, 25 percent dark matter and 70 percent a mysterious energy that has been called dark energy and has nothing to do with” dark matter.

So what that says to me is that we are only seeing with our eyes the manifestation of 4 percent of what’s here, the 4 percent of the universe that consists of atoms. We can’t see the 25 percent that is dark matter, or the 70 percent that is dark energy holding it all together.

Now this is a vision as wondrous, as amazing, as unbelievable as Mary’s vision of a child who would change the world! And it is as wondrous, as amazing, as unbelievable as our vision that this child is still changing our lives, still changing our world. A vision of everything is what we need to tap into to find a unifying vision for our church. Anyone can conceive a church. But we must conceive a vision of which the church is a mere instrument, crying in the wilderness of our world, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things.