

OIL AND WATER
(The Blunders and The Wonders)

I like miracles. We all like miracles. They mean we don't have to be responsible, effective, or accountable. And since it is impossible in this broken world to be responsible enough, effective enough, or accountable enough to make a perfect world, miracles are truly appealing. In fact, most people, given the chance to choose between a miraculous explanation and a logical explanation of a biblical story, prefer the miraculous explanation, even if the logical explanation is also astounding, and far more meaningful. (Feeding five thousand; raising a dead child; colt for Palm Sunday; and on and on.)

In study groups, people at first jump to the conclusion that either I don't like miracles or I doubt the power of God. I encounter miracles every day (things I cannot explain and do not understand). It's a miracle to me that some of you do not take the Christian Faith more to heart, and make the Christian church a higher priority in your life. That seems crazy and illogical to me, like stopping our prayers when they have blessed us so much. I do not understand it. It's a miracle.

And God is always doing wondrous things all around and within us. I love that as much as any of you do, because it is so much bigger than anything we can do by ourselves. I am so glad it doesn't all depend upon us. But God went to considerable thought and trouble to create this place the way he did. I suspect that God will not break the precepts and principles that this creation is built on – returning us all to chaos and anarchy, to whim and fancy, to meaninglessness – by actually running things miraculously. So miracles, I suspect, are when natural law is suddenly revealed to have potential we did not know was possible. I remind you that if any of the twelve apostles could have seen you turn on a light switch, drive a car, or get on a plane from here to Denver, they would have been more awestruck than by anything they saw Jesus do. And as a matter of fact, Jesus said that would happen: “*Greater things than these will you do ...*” (John 14:12)

Most of the world is happy to celebrate a miraculous Christmas because most of the world does not intend to do very much about it anyway. After all, what obligations can magic place on you? Magic wands

don't ask you to learn or grow into anything; they don't ask for commitment or sacrifice or devotion. Just poof, and Cinderella is a princess. Then poof again, and you are not. So lots of folk love Christmas because it is only for a few days each year, and then back to the usual. But I cannot get away with that. Jesus is Lord and Christ to me, and never goes poof. That puts demands on my life that never go away. And I would be bereft if they did.

So sometimes I smile at the magic show. The lights are pretty. I love the exchange of gifts, no matter how crass some people make it sound. And the music is sometimes incredible, even when it speaks of things I don't actually believe. I love watching *Bambi* and *Dumbo* too, though I don't think they are factual stories.

But I think serious Christians should know the difference between the real Christmas and the magic show. However fun the magic show, it is a far deeper joy to get back to the real thing. If most of Christendom will never do this, I cannot help that. And some of you say to me, "Christmas is my favorite time of year. Why can't you just leave it alone? Why must you always ruin it?" And I reply, "But it has already *been* ruined. And Christmas is the offer of such light and truth and wonder that I cannot keep quiet when I see it being reduced to some little magic show for temporary amusement or entertainment."

At the core of the magic show is the Virgin Birth. Perhaps I could ignore the Virgin Birth and just work around it, as so many others do and have done for generations. But I am too concerned about what the Virgin Birth obscures, hides, and even denies. The Virgin Birth is a very big blunder in Christendom, and it steps in front of, and takes center stage away from, the incredible Wonder of the Incarnation – a much deeper and truer Christmas.

The Virgin Birth is only the focal point of this blunder. It is surrounded with shepherds, wise men, King Herod killing babies, angel choirs, and all manner of beasts standing around a manger in a stable. And all of it is built deeply into our psyches with art and music and carols and crèches and children participating in pageants in every little church all over the land. So you don't have to worry or be afraid that anything I say here will make a dent in this vast institutionalized Christmas celebration. Only, I talk to you as straight as I can because I think that is what my Lord requires me to do. And I think Jesus is not at all happy with Christmas. Partly that's because I have never known

anybody who was converted by Christmas – who got the Message of the Christian Life and Way from Christmas. Christmas does not ask anything of us, or invite us into a New WAY of Life, or speak to us of the Kingdom. The ingredients are there: John the Baptist crying “repent”; the gifts of the Magi; adoration all around. But it never seems to “take,” because the focus is on Mary and miracles. Yet Mary does not save, nor do miracles. Jesus saves. And in the wilderness temptations, why else would Jesus have rejected miracles as a foundation of His ministry? *“There can be no other foundation than the one already laid: I mean Jesus Christ himself.”* (I Corinthians 3:11)

I think if we wanted a true celebration of the real Christmas, we would all be down at the ocean getting baptized every year. The Holy Spirit came to Jesus in His own conversion and baptism. If we turn our lives over to Him and then follow Him into baptism, we also receive the Holy Spirit – and hear God calling us beloved sons and daughters too, before sending us into *our* ministries. That is the beginning of Christendom. Not a physical birth – a spiritual birth. *“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew [not born of a virgin – born anew], he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”* (John 3:3) Clearly Jesus did not think Himself important as virgin-born. He never ever mentioned it (or had ever heard of it). But He knew Himself Spirit-born, and that is the key to everything He cared about.

So even if Jesus had been born of a virgin, I would be very sad that we decided to focus on that instead of on the baptism. Oil and water do not mix. Well, virgin oil and the water of baptism do not mix either. *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”* (John 3:6) So whether it is virgin birth or natural birth, it is not the physical birth that matters. And I’m sorry, but virginity does *not* equal Holy Spirit.

So the Virgin Birth is a huge blunder that is hiding the true Wonder. And the true Wonder, as always in Christendom, is God revealing himself in Jesus Christ: God with us; God establishing ongoing, personal relationship with us; the Holy Spirit of Jesus guiding and comforting and inspiring us all the way, every day. The Virgin Birth puts huge distance between us and Jesus. The whole meaning of the Incarnation is compromised. None of us were born of virgins; that is not the way God created us. Jesus came to be with us – as one of us – but we couldn’t stand it and wouldn’t have it, so we keep trumping up all these stories

and ways to make sure everybody knows how special He was when He walked among us. Well, He *was* special, whatever we think or conclude about it. But if God wanted to keep special distance from us in physical ways, why did he come down to earth in the first place? Jesus was one of us – fully human (as the old creed says). That is why He has so much authority to lead us. And that is what grants Him the right to tell us we are special too – true children of God. Virgin Birth obscures and minimizes this, and that is not okay!

It puts too much distance between you and Jesus, and He came to take that distance away. It also inadvertently puts great emphasis on virginity itself, as if sexuality were somehow wrong or bad. The way we *use* sexuality is often wrong or bad, like everything else in this world. But you will never convince me that it is somehow holier to have never “done it” than to participate in the wonder and creation of life as God has designed it. Of course, you will tell me that Mary is both virgin *and* mother. But I will reply that *you* have no such option, and that we have a long history of convents and monasteries to prove that the Virgin Birth has caused a huge negation of sexuality and motherhood, fatherhood, and family life. Oil and water do not mix. And why do I keep running into Catholics (and others) who insist that Jesus had no natural brothers or sisters, even though the Scriptures clearly state that He did? (Matthew 12:46; 13:55; Mark 3:31; Luke 8:19; John 7:3-5) Why is it so offensive to so many people to think that Mary might have “done it”? The Cult of the Virgin is huge, and it obscures many things. Most importantly, it obscures the Incarnation. The blunders hide the Wonders! We keep trying to pretend that we don’t have to correct our mistakes, but they keep us from fullness of Life.

I also have another concern. What do you think is going to happen to Christians across the world when irrefutable evidence turns up that the Virgin Birth story was tacked on years later and is in no way historical or factual? The day will surely come. The evidence is already irrefutable, but never mind that for a minute. Do you trust Christians to be honest and always welcome truth? You do know how the church greeted the news that the earth was not flat but was spinning in space? You remember Galileo (1633)? You have heard of the Scopes Trial (1925)? You are confident, therefore, that if the Pope had information in the Vatican archives that the Virgin Birth was false, he would of course inform the world? What are you going to do with all the frescoes and all the stained glass? And that’s only the tip of the iceberg.

But what will happen to the ordinary Christian on the day when it comes to light that the birth narratives around Jesus are not true? Will you be there to tell them that nothing of importance ever rested on the Virgin Birth in the first place? That in fact, it was a blunder distracting us from far greater light and truth? Will you be ready to remind them that no early Christian ever believed in Jesus because of the Virgin Birth, but rather because of the Death and Resurrection and Pentecost? I wonder if anybody will have trouble believing for a while, having been misled and lied to by silence for so long. Many Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Methodist scholars, as well as biblical scholars from nearly every walk of life, know everything that I teach you about the Virgin Birth. They write about it, speak of it, and acknowledge it in many circles, but they keep quiet about it in the church. That is going to turn out to be no favor to the church.

So where did this blunder come from? Nothing very strange. No intended chicanery. Jewish culture in the first century put no emphasis on birth days, only on birth lines – genealogy. But then Christendom went into the Greek and Roman world, where they put great emphasis on birth days and assumed that any important person had a propitious birth. (Look up the birth stories they told of Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar.) So people in the Greco-Roman world wanted to know: “What happened at Jesus’ birth? If He was the Son of God, it must have been an amazing birth.” But nobody knew. There was no information. Sometimes it is hard to admit that we have no information. So they went looking for some. Ultimately they were left with only one source to look in: Old Testament prophecy. Independently, what we call the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke try to piece together – from Old Testament prophecy – what must have happened. But prophecy is far from an exact science.

There are a few given assumptions about the Messiah: He must be in David’s line. Strangely neglecting Isaiah 9:1-6, He should be born in the City of David – Bethlehem. And there must be something startling – signs and portents, as they say – to verify the importance of such an important birth. The Matthew and Luke accounts agree on only two things. One, He was born in Bethlehem. And two, they both locked on to one big and miraculous sign: He was born of a virgin. They both found this in Isaiah 7:14: “*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*” But it was a blunder – a mistranslation! The Greek Septuagint, translated from Hebrew, rendered the Hebrew word

for “young woman” into the Greek word for “virgin.” Even the most conservative scholar today will admit that this mistake did in fact occur. It is impossible to deny. No modern translation claims that Isaiah 7:14 should read “virgin.” Whether Isaiah 7:14 has anything to do with Jesus in the first place is another subject, and we don’t have time for it this morning. In any case, at some time in the first or second century, this very impressive “sign” was claimed to herald Jesus’ birth. But its source was a mistake in translation. Yet to this day, few are willing to deal with this mistake, or what grew from it. Maybe Jesus was born of a virgin anyway, they mutter – even though the source of the fable is wrong. So the church hangs on to the blunder. (For the record, we still have a Flat-Earth Society too, and I know a fellow who has spent his entire adult life trying to prove that the stars are reflections of light from our own solar system, bouncing back to us off the “shell” at the edge of our solar system. He came to this church three or four times, but I ended up telling him there were a lot of churches around here that would appreciate his kind of thinking a lot more than we do.)

Of course, the plot thickens. To get Jesus born in David’s line, we trace His genealogy from His father Joseph back to David – then turn right around and say Joseph was not His father. The genealogy shows the earlier tradition. Neither Matthew nor Luke knew what they were talking about, or at least if one did, the other certainly did not. Luke has shepherds, angel choirs, and no room in the inn, and we get Jesus born in Bethlehem because of a census. That’s because it was hard to explain why He was called a Nazarene, since that means He was born in Nazareth. Matthew has magi, a unique star so that Jesus will not have an astrology chart like any normal mortal, and Herod killing babies like Pharaoh did at the time of Moses (though there is no record of Herod doing this).

More troubling: Luke says the birth took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. It is known that Quirinius was governor of Syria from A.D. 6-9, that Judea was incorporated at that time, and that a census was taken which caused the rebellion of Judas (Acts 5:37). Matthew says Herod was King, and that he tried to kill all the babies and had conversations with the magi. This Herod ruled from 40 B.C. to 4 B.C., when he died. So Jesus was born both in 4 B.C. and in 6 A.D. That is even tougher to pull off than being born of a virgin. The Jesus in Matthew was ten years old when the Jesus in Luke was being born. I have no doubt that God could have had Jesus born of a virgin if he wanted to, though I cannot imagine why he would want to, seeing as the whole point was to

come like one of us. But even God, no matter how omnipotent, is going to have trouble with the miracle of having Jesus born twice, ten years apart.

It gets clearer and clearer that probing Old Testament prophecy is not an accurate way to piece together factual history. Nobody knows anything about Jesus' birth; we never did and we still do not. If you are not afraid to look at the evidence – internal evidence from Scripture itself – you must end up admitting that the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke are nonhistorical, and are not to be taken as anything other than a later and symbolic adoration of the birth. Why do we say “later”? Because Mark, the writer of the earliest Gospel (around 60-65 A.D.), makes no mention of the Virgin Birth. Do you really think he knew about it yet failed to mention it? I read to you two passages where Paul makes it very clear that he had never heard of the Virgin Birth, and in fact where he claims that Jesus was born naturally and that Joseph was the father. Paul is writing from about twelve to thirty years after Jesus' death, but he had never heard of the Virgin Birth? Or he didn't think it was worth mentioning, and even inadvertently denies it? Even if you could explain away one of these things, can you explain away all of them?

There are other indications of the birth narratives being superimposed on an earlier tradition that had never heard of the Virgin Birth. Fundamentalists, of course, will turn triple cartwheels trying to duck, dodge, and explain away all evidence that the Bible reveals such human flaws and real-life errors. The flaws are partly why I love the Bible – an honest record from those who came before us. But to many, for reasons I cannot fathom, errors in the record are seen as a threat to faith itself. It is better, I think, to put faith in God and in the LIVING Word – Son and Holy Spirit. But to each his own.

Christmas is about Jesus, not about shepherds or wise men or a star or Herod killing babies. Our best assumption would be that Jesus was born and grew up in Nazareth, in a devout Jewish family, and that Joseph and Mary were a normal, married Jewish couple. Jesus had five younger brothers and several sisters. Joseph was a carpenter, and he possibly died young, leaving Jesus to help Mary raise the family. Those are my best guesses. But we really know nothing about Jesus' life until He was about thirty years of age: when He was drawn to the reform movement of John the Baptist, was baptized, and had a profound spiritual

awakening – an awakening that has had profound impact on the world ever since. And we are all invited to follow Him into this baptism, and into a New WAY of Life. That is the WONDER, and it is far greater than the blunder.

Oil and water do not mix. Dump the virgin and follow Jesus into baptism – into your own relationship with God via His Holy Spirit. The blunder may look appealing on the surface, but it is empty and meaningless in comparison to the WONDER of Jesus' coming, and His continuing presence with us.

The point is: We are sinners estranged from God. (That is what “sin” means.) And we try to cover it up for as long as we can, in any way we can. So we rewrite history, even our own personal history. It doesn't matter how angry, lonely, tired, unhappy, destructive, negative, or depressed we become, we keep trying to cover it up. Don't take my word for it – look around; watch the news. We keep trying to pretend we are okay – “That's our story and we're sticking to it.”

Then Christ comes – He comes into our world – not knowing at first how huge His own identity and destiny are. And He comes still today – if we can tear aside all the veils that try to honor Him, even as they obscure Him. If you want to love Jesus – truly, deeply, and personally – concentrate on what kind of man He was, not on what kind of God others say you are supposed to worship. If that sounds strange to you, it is also the very essence of Incarnation.

Nevertheless, Christmas is never about our having a change of heart all on our own. We still stick to our story of being okay for as long as we can. Christmas is about God being unwilling to leave the great distance between us – about God not wanting us so unhappy and alone, and feeling abandoned and estranged and hopeless. So to reach us, God came down as one of us: Incarnation. But God did not do it from fancy or flashy. That was the whole point. He “invaded” one of us who was willing – as he is willing to “invade” any of *us* who are willing. That does not mean we are all equal or the same; quite the opposite. We are all unique, and there will never be another Jesus. Nor can we imagine opening to the Spirit as much as He did. Yet He invites us. And He comes as one of us so we will not be too frightened to listen ... or to follow.

Even then, the shields are so thick and the denial so locked in that it took a Cross to break through – to reveal the depth and extent of our rejection and alienation, and of our determination to be independent from our Creator. But it also revealed the extent of our Creator’s love and compassion and forgiveness. So it is always a close race between his love and our pride. Nevertheless, before and since, we have been busy piling up junk to put between ourselves and God. Blunder obscures Wonder. But it feels safer – better to worship and adore from afar, than to throw caution to the wind and GO WITH HIM.

Virgin oil and the water of baptism do not mix. You are more than you can possibly know; you are loved more than you can possibly believe. Jesus comes to tell and show and take you into the Way – into an eternal Life so full of Wonder and excitement and discovery and meaning that no words can begin to describe it. Only following Him can reveal it. The Virgin may comfort you where you are – pat you on the head, pray for you, make you feel better for a while. Jesus comes that you might have LIFE, and have it abundantly. That calls us out, challenges us, scares the bejesus out of us. But once tasted, who would trade it for anything else on earth?