



Though faith should be received with childlike trust, ultimately for faith to be faith it must be wrestled with. It has been so since ancient times, most clearly disclosed in the literal wrestling match between God and Jacob at the river Jabbok. A faith that is never examined nor questioned is not faith, but fear of what questions might bring and that your belief was founded upon sinking sand. The same is true for scripture. A childlike acceptance enables us to access the fruits of its truth. As our Presbyterian ordination vows explain, it is our unique and authoritative witness for God's will. And yet, to simply receive all that it is written in its pages as, "gospel truth", would force us to engage in some of the most horrific atrocities humankind has perpetrated such as slavery, misogyny, and murder.

The early church recognized this aspect of faith and scripture as clearly stated in St. Anselm's phrase, "a faith seeking understanding". We do not understand and then believe, for faith ultimately is a leap across the unknown and the unseen.

As Dr. Martin Luther King wrote, "Faith is taking the first step, even when you don't see the whole staircase."

But once we make that leap, all the questions we left behind come crawling back and enable us to refine our beliefs. This past summer I asked you all to submit those irksome

Bible passages that strain your intellectual credulity and for the next several weeks, we will be exploring those questions.

Today we focus on your question about that time-honored passage that has led to endless theological debates – and even some Bible burnings to boot. It is a short and simple verse "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel". There are two main debates surrounding the virgin birth. One centers on biblical interpretation – that is how we read scripture to glean truth and the extent to which we receive biblical statements as ironclad historical facts. The other centers on the theological implications of a virgin birth. Over the ages, many have argued that a virgin birth was necessary for Jesus to save the world, and that believing this fact is necessary for our own salvation. Since this series primarily focuses on biblical interpretation, we will spend most of our time this morning on biblical interpretation.

Ancient literature is filled with accounts of virgin births, Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, the Egyptian Son God, Ra, and even Plato.

Matthew tells us the virgin birth took place to fulfill a prophecy, quoting Isaiah 7:14, "Behold a young virgin shall conceive...." The history of interpretation around this passage is fascinating.

In 1952, it was cause for a Bible burning when the RSV went to press. The controversy centered on the Hebrew word *almah*. Historically, the King James Bible translated it as “virgin”, but better scholarship, relying on greater archaeological analysis used in the RSV, translated it as “young woman”. One pastor burned the RSV, believing it degraded the prophecy.

Matthew’s translation of Isaiah is easily explained.

Matthew, being a Hellenized Jew, worked from the Septuagint, the Greek interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures translated around the 3rd century B.C., and it translated the Hebrew, *almah*, into the Greek, *Parthenos*, which does mean virgin. Nevertheless, the preponderance of historical usage of *almah* leans heavily in favor of “young woman” and many scholars understand that Isaiah was referring to the child of the king current at the time, King Ahaz. It was not uncommon for New Testament authors to reinterpret Hebrew texts to illuminate the nature of Christ. Part of their aim was to convince their audience that Jesus was not a departure from the history of God, but a natural progression.

And yet, Matthew is clearly referring to Mary as a virgin, as does Luke, so there is much more to this topic than Isaiah, and for that we turn to the early 1900s, right here in New York City. At the time, evolution and historical biblical criticism were emerging and challenged some basic presumptions. How could Moses have written the first five books of the Bible if his eulogy is Deuteronomy? Where did all the

people in Genesis come from once Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden if they were the first two people? How could the earth be created in seven days and only be 6,000 years old when modern science counts it to over 4 billion?

The emergence of biblical criticism led to the emergence of a movement known as fundamentalism. At the time in the Presbyterian Church, in order to be ordained, one had to subscribe to a list of five so-called fundamentals, one of which was the Virgin birth. There was a cartoon at the time that summed up the fundamentalist’s fear. In it, a man is descending a staircase and with each step faith erodes, Bible not infallible, no miracles, no virgin birth, no resurrection, no atonement, and finally atheism. For them, each step was critical to a strong belief.

But Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of First Presbyterian in New York, felt the fundamentalists were increasingly intolerant and turning Christianity into a list of beliefs, rather than embracing a way of life. He sought to foster a Christianity that was open-minded, that embraced modern science, so he preached a sermon, “Shall Fundamentalism Win?” In it, he repudiated a doctrinal faith and called for a more accepting Christian fellowship. William Jennings Bryan (yes that William!) engaged in debate with Fosdick in the New York Times, and Bryan even ran for Moderator of the National Presbyterian Church! Though Bryan lost election, he convinced the Assembly to take action against Fosdick.

Ultimately, he resigned from First Presbyterian and left for the church Rockefeller

would build for him, Riverside, on the Upper West Side. Meanwhile, Presbyterians seesawed over the next several General Assemblies, with the topic of the virgin birth front and center.

The two extremes fought for the soul of the denomination, with the fundamentalists still insisting on the verbal perfection of scripture, and the liberals casting doubt on all of scripture, insisting that humankind was basically good and not in need of a savior. Eventually even Fosdick called out this extreme in his sermon “The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism”, accusing them of changing beliefs to accommodate culture.

A neo-orthodoxy emerged which, typified by Karl Barth, insisted on a God, a judgement, and grace that would have to break into human history for our salvation, but that at the same time did not revert to 17th century literalism.

Which brings us back to the virgin birth. Must we believe in it to call ourselves Christian? Must we not believe in it to call ourselves enlightened and rational? An emphatic “No!” to both.

All too often, our modern Western mindset gets in the way. Much of the Bible needs to be approached more from a Hebraic, poetic worldview, rather than a Newtonian clockwork worldview [Which is not even correct scientifically! Much less in biblical translation!].

The virgin birth is an important topic, but perhaps the more important original question is, “Do you believe God is the creator of the universe?” If so, then the virgin birth is an easy trick, so could God do the virgin birth?! I believe

it, yes! Did the virgin birth in fact take place? For me personally, answering this question does not impact my faith one way or the other. And we can easily get mired in supposition after supposition.

For some, not only was Mary a virgin, but she was also immaculately conceived, since God’s holiness “demanded a pure sacrifice”. So for Jesus to be born pure, Mary had to be as well, since Jesus would be tainted by sin while moving through the birth canal! This type of thinking is applying human constraints upon a divine being.

Much of the Bible is written as story; to tell a story about Jesus, to convey His uniqueness, and to lead us to Him. The Bible is the word of God (with a small “w”) that leads us to the Word of God (capital “w”.) Matthew is conveying to us that there was something unique, mystical, and powerful about Jesus’ birth and our Western minds get caught up in the wrong questions.

Thus, despite all the centuries of debate surrounding this topic, to be a Christian as Presbyterians understand it, requires answering but one question, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior?”

Ultimately, we are called to follow Christ. To trust in Him, His ways, His love, His compassion and His grace.

Tomorrow our nation remembers Dr. Martin Luther King and his legacy. His faith exemplified focus, not primarily on esoteric doctrine, but taking the same loving action our Lord did. This is what Dr. King said about what he wanted to be remembered for, “I'd like

somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others... And I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.”

Scripture is meant to lead us to Christ, not doctrine, but the Lord Himself. Fosdick summed up so well the center of faith wherever you land on the Virgin Birth, "I believe in the personal God revealed in Christ, in His omnipresent activity and endless resources to achieve His purposes for us and for all...."