



This morning I want to launch us into the message with a reading from one of the great minds in theology—Dr. Seuss. I have here a dog-eared copy of *On Beyond Zebra*, a favorite Dr. Seuss book. I want to read a portion of it, and be sure to listen closely, because this is the key to everything I want to say.

Said Conrad Cornelius O'Donnell O'Dell, my very young friend who was learning to spell, "The A is for Ape, the B is for Bear, the C is for Camel, the H is for Hair, the M is for Mouse, the R is for Rat ... I know all twenty-six letters like that. Through to Z is for Zebra, I know them all well," said Conrad Cornelius O'Donnell O'Dell. "Now I know everything anyone knows from beginning to end, from the start to the close, because Z is as far as the alphabet goes."

Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor when I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more. A letter he had never dreamed of before. And I said, "You can stop if you want with the Z, and most people stop with the Z, but not me. In the places I go, there are things that I see that I never could spell if I stopped with a Z.

"I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends, my alphabet starts where your alphabet ends. My alphabet starts with this letter called yezz, it's the letter I use to spell yezzametezz. You'll be sort of surprised what there is to be found, once you go beyond Z and start poking around. So on beyond zebra explore like Columbus, discover new letters like wum, which is for wumbus, my high-spouting whale who lives high on a hill and who never comes down till it's time to refill. So on beyond Z, it's high time you were shown that you really don't know all there is to be known."

Today I invite you on a journey that's "on beyond zebra." The Apostles' Creed affirms, *I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.* If these last two lines are true, then when Jesus was born, God added a new letter to our alphabet. He went beyond zebra!

Maybe that's why it's so hard for some to believe. The Mormon church teaches Mary wasn't a virgin, but instead she was impregnated by a God who came to her in flesh and blood. Then there's books like, *The Virgin Mary Conspiracy*, claiming Jesus was really the illegitimate son of Herod, which is why He was called

the King of the Jews. That may not surprise us. Skeptics have been writing that sort of thing for ages.

The Virgin Birth was hard for Joseph and Mary to believe.

It's one of those things that's hard to believe, that's for sure. It was hard for Mary and Joseph too. I was thumbing through all the Christmas cards we got this year. It's always fun to look at how they depict the birth of Christ. Mary and Joseph always appear unruffled and peaceful with bright halos hovering over their heads. Inside, the cards stress themes like joy, goodwill, love, peace, warmth. But when I read the real story in the gospels, I hear a different tone.

In Luke's gospel, when the angel comes to Mary, she was "*greatly troubled*" and "*afraid*" at his appearance. The angel told her, "*You will conceive and give birth to a son*" who "*will be called the Son of the Most High*" and whose "*kingdom will never end.*" Upon hearing that, Mary had something far more practical on her mind: "*How will this be? I'm a virgin!*" The answer couldn't have helped much, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...*" (Lk.1:35). That's beyond zebra!

When I served as a youth pastor at another church I had an unmarried intern working for me who bravely stood before our youth group and told of how she recently found out she was pregnant. She was ashamed that she'd sinned against God and let us all down. Of course, her sin was no worse than many others, but she knew she wouldn't be able to hide it for long. No wonder Mary, a Jewish teenager, was greatly troubled. This isn't something you can hide.

Today, millions of teenage girls get pregnant every year. Some of them on purpose. So for us Mary's predicament isn't that big of a deal. But in a close-knit Jewish village in the first century, the angel's words would be anything but good news. Jewish law regarded a betrothed woman who became pregnant an adulteress, subject to being stoned. This would impact every hour of every day of the rest of her life.

Joseph didn't deal with the news any better. When he was told Mary was pregnant, he was kind enough to agree to divorce her in private rather than press charges. He did that because he knew virgins don't have babies. But then the same angel showed up to him and said in a dream, "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid*

to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:20). What's amazing about Joseph was he did what the angel commanded without question.

Meanwhile, Mary hurried off to be with the one person who might understand what she was going through—her older relative, Elizabeth. She'd experienced a miracle too, but her miracle was different. To finally become pregnant after years of trying and waiting and finally giving up was a dream come true. She was in a long line of great women who'd suffered through years of infertility only to be blessed in their old age with a child, and not just any child, but a special child. Sarah gave birth to Isaac when she was 90. Rachel watched her sister Leah have four sons before she finally conceived and gave birth to Joseph. After years of waiting and pouring her heart out to the Lord, Hannah finally gave birth to Samuel. And now, Elizabeth would give birth to John the Baptist.

These were all impossible pregnancies, but they were different from Mary's. These women **wanted** a child, begged for a child. For them, the "impossible" condition to overcome was infertility. In Mary's case, there was no yearning for a child, and the "impossible" condition wasn't infertility, but virginity!

So you can see it wasn't easy for Mary to believe and it wasn't easy for Joseph. And it's not easy for us either. The pastor of one of our nation's largest churches said in an interview, "I could not in print or in public deny or affirm the virgin birth of Christ. When I have something I can't comprehend I just don't deal with it." I'm not sure exactly what he's saying but at the least he's saying the virgin birth doesn't matter.

Someone asked Larry King, "If you could select any one person across all of history to interview, who would it be?" His answer was he'd like to interview Jesus. When asked, "What would you ask him?" he replied, "I'd like to ask him if he was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me." Kind of like a new letter in the alphabet!

I want to say along with Larry King and the Apostles' Creed that the Virgin Birth **does** matter. As a matter of fact, it's an essential part of our Christian faith. Let me give four reasons why.

The Virgin Birth is an essential part of our Christian faith.

It's essential for the integrity of Scripture

We say this is the word of God. That means we believe what it says is true. It's without error. And it teaches without apology that Jesus was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the agency of the Holy Spirit. We already saw what the gospels say, but the Old Testament teaches it as well. Way back in Genesis 3:15 as God cursed the devil he said, "*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*" This is

about the coming Messiah who would come from "her seed." But for God to say "**her** seed" is very unusual. Normally he'd say "**his** seed" because the woman doesn't provide a seed. This is a strong hint the Messiah would come from a woman without the help of the male seed.

Then there is Isaiah 7:14. This is a prophecy that says, "*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and she will him Immanuel.'*" The word that's used there for "virgin" is the Hebrew word *alma*. It strongly suggests virginity. It's a bit like the English word "maiden." We don't use that word much anymore, but it communicated the idea of purity. Much later, when Matthew quotes this very verse in relation to Mary, he understood it to mean "virginity."

Maybe the real question is, do we believe this is the Word of God? If we decide we can pick and chose what parts of it we want to believe and what parts to throw out, what's to keep us from throwing it all out?

Some people say, but a virgin birth is contrary to the laws of biology. It's never been scientifically duplicated in Scripture or in life. But this argument rests on the assumption we live in a closed universe where nature always operates according to fixed laws. If we can accept the miracle of Christ's resurrection, or even His ability to heal, why can't we accept the virgin birth? If there is a God, wouldn't He stand outside the laws of nature? And given our understanding of who Jesus was, doesn't it make sense He'd enter this world in a miraculous way?

I love how C.S. Lewis put it, "No woman ever conceived a child, no mare a foal, without Him. But once, and for a special purpose, He dispensed with that long line which is His instrument: once His life-giving finger touched a woman without passing through the ages of interlocked events. Once the great glove of Nature was taken off His hand. His naked hand touched her. There was of course a unique reason for it. That time He was creating not simply a man but the Man who was to be Himself: was creating Man anew; was beginning, at this divine and human point, the New Creation of all things. The whole soiled and weary universe quivered at this direct injection of essential life: direct, uncontaminated, not drained through all the crowded history of Nature."

It's essential for the deity of Christ

The enemies of Jesus knew this. In John 8 Jesus confronts the Pharisees and says, "*Your father is the devil.*" They say, "*Abraham is our father.*" Jesus says, "*If Abraham is your father, why are you trying to kill me? If Abraham is your father, do the deeds of Abraham.*" Then they said to Him, "*We are not illegitimate children,*" they protested. "*The only Father we have is God himself.*" (Jn. 8:41). Do you see what they're saying? That Jesus was born illegitimately, of fornication. Because of that He couldn't be who He said He was. Jesus responded by saying, "*If God were your*

Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me...." (v. 42).

Even the enemies of Jesus knew His claim to have come from God was dependent on the virgin birth. Remember what the angel said to Mary? *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God"* (Lk.1:35). The virgin birth is the underlying assumption behind everything the Bible says about Jesus; everything He claimed about Himself. To throw out the virgin birth is to throw out what we call the incarnation—God invading the planet earth in the person of His Son. John doesn't start his gospel with the virgin birth, but he does start it with what is true **because** of the virgin birth. He says, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..."* (Jn.1:1–2). A few lines later he adds, *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth"* (v. 14). That's pretty clear!

It's essential for the humanity of Christ

The fact Jesus was born of a woman reminds us He wasn't just fully God but fully human as well. Throughout the history of the church, more people have denied that He was man than that He was God. How could God dirty Himself by taking on flesh? But He did and that should be of great comfort to us. *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need"* (Hebrews 4:15–16).

Many of us struggle through life. We find resisting temptation difficult. We're frightened by the thought of suffering and death. It's here the reality that He was born of a woman helps us. Through Christ, God knows what it's like to be tempted. He knows what it's like to suffer. We don't have to explain to God what it's like—He knows. He's been through it. He's experienced it firsthand. We have a God who knows and gets our weaknesses. He's approachable.

In an episode from the TV show *Parenthood*, the characters Adam and Kristina Braverman have come to realize that there's something seriously wrong with their son. The current problem involves Max's refusal to dress in anything but a pirate costume. Adam, afraid that his son will get ridiculed at school, gets increasingly exasperated by Max's stubbornness. Adam and Kristina lie awake at night, unable to sleep as they worry about Max's future. In a later scene the Braverman's have an appointment with the highly sought-after child psychologist Dr. Pelikan. When the doctor informs Adam and Kristina that Max's behavior is consistent with an Asperger's diagnosis, they look like they've been hit in the face, and the following conversation ensues:

Adam: "How long is this going to take, then? To get him through this and back on track?"

Dr. Pelikan: "Unfortunately there is no cure for Asperger's. It is a syndrome that he will always have."

Adam: "I don't understand."

Christina: "What are we supposed to do for him? I don't know..."

Adam: "So just in case we can never see you again, what do you suggest we do to get him out of the pirate costume?"

Dr. Pelikan: "The first step is not to wrench Max out of his comfort zone; the first step is to join Max where he is. And when he's ready, you walk him into the world."

Adam, looking shell-shocked and scared, puts an arm around a heartsick Kristina and confesses, "Kristina, I just, I don't ... I can deal with anything, I can deal with disease, with illness, with a broken bone; give me something I can fix. But I don't know how to deal with this. This is for life."

Finally, after all his pressure, demands, and bargains have failed to change Max's behavior, Adam decides to try Dr. Pelikan's advice: he enters Max's world by dressing up as a pirate and plays a game of pirate sword-fighting with his son. Father and son dash around in the backyard, both of them clearly delighted to be with each other.

This is what God has done for us in sending His son. He joined us where we're at—in all our pain and suffering and temptations. Because of that, we know He understands and we can approach Him with confidence.

It's essential for our salvation

If Jesus wasn't born of a virgin, our salvation wouldn't even be possible. The Bible says all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. As a result, we're separated from God. A holy God can't ignore sin. Nothing we can do on our own can make it all right. So we need to be rescued from this situation; we need salvation.

That's where Jesus comes in. We know He was a man, a human being like all of us. That was crucial for Him to be able represent us on the cross. But if He was **just** a man, like the rest of us, then He shares our need for salvation. He's then a part of our problem, not the solution to our problem. It's like if two guys fall into a deep pit, neither one can save the other. One guy says, "Get me out of here." The other guy says, "I can't get you out of here; I'm in the same predicament you are." You see, they need help from above; from someone who hasn't fallen into the same pit. Every man who ever lived has fallen into that pit of sin and needs salvation, but not Jesus.

To use another analogy, it's like Jesus came to rescue someone drowning in a river. As God He had one foot firmly planted on the riverbank. As man, the other foot was in the rushing water.

It's this very stance that allowed Him to save the drowning, to snatch them out of the rapid current while remaining firmly anchored Himself.

This is so important I'll give you still another analogy. It's like two people; we'll call them Fred and Jim. They're close friends but something happens and the friendship breaks down. Fred is convinced Jim is wrong and Jim is convinced Fred is wrong. They both cling tightly to their hurt and anger and refuse to even talk. How can this be resolved? They need a mediator, a go-between. But who is qualified to be that? The best mediator is someone who both Fred and Jim know and respect, and who'll be impartial. So Bill comes along as a mediator. Bill has to represent Fred to Jim and Jim to Fred. He can't be too identified with either Fred or Jim, but he has to have points of contact with both if he's to do the job. He has to be close enough to both of them to represent them both but not be totally identified with either. That's a mediator.

The Bible says, "***For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ***" (1 Tim. 2:5). He can be that because He represents God to us, and us to God. When He was on the cross paying for our sins, which God's justice demanded, He could represent us because He was one of us, but He could also be totally pleasing to God because He was God. Do you see how crucial the virgin birth is to our salvation? If He wasn't born of a virgin, He wasn't God and His work of salvation, which was the very reason He was sent, has failed.

I hope you can see how important it is to affirm the virgin birth as part of our faith. And, you know, when it comes right down to it, it does require faith. Everything I've said today is so left-brain, so rational, but part of the problem is that we can't grasp this with our finite minds. It's beyond zebra. How **was** that egg fertilized within Mary? What **did** happen? How could an infinite God be reduced to a microscopic embryo? It's a mystery. Let it remain a mystery.

In a few hours, you'll all be glued to your TV sets oohing and aahing at young men running very fast with a weirdly shaped ball

in their hands, jumping very high to catch that ball and hitting each other with great ferocity to knock that ball out of someone's hands. That will inspire you to yell and scream and do all kinds of foolish things. But here in the virgin birth we have something far more amazing that should inspire wonder and worship. Let me close with a poem about this mystery from the pen of Lucy Shaw that might help pour fuel on the fire of your worship:

After the bright beam of hot annunciation
fused heaven with dark earth
his searing sharply-focused light
went out for a while
eclipsed in amniotic gloom:
his cool immensity of splendor
his universal grace
small-folded in a warm dim female space—
the Word stern-sentenced to be nine months dumb—
infinity walled in a womb until the next enormity—the Mighty,
after submissions to a woman's pains
lay helpless on the barn-bare floor
first-tasting bitter earth.
Now, I in him surrender
to the crush and cry of birth.
Because eternity was closeted in time
he is my open door to forever.
From his imprisonment my freedoms grow, find wings.
Now part of his body, I transcend this flesh.
From his sweet silence my mouth sings.
Out of his dark, I glow.
My life, as his, slips through death's mesh,
time's bars, joins hands with heaven,
speaks with stars.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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