***How Can This Be?***

A sermon preached at LPCC on Luke 1:26-38

December 23, 2018

Rev. John D. Suk, PhD

Let’s be honest. Most of us smile, knowingly, when we think of the virgin birth. I mean, you don’t have to have been taught Ontario’s Sex-Ed curriculum to see the problems here. Even Mary understands. She says, “How can this be, since I am a virgin.”

It’s much the same when we think about the resurrection stories. Luke says that when Mary—yes, the same Mary, Jesus’ mother—when Mary and some other women told the disciples that the grave was empty, the disciples thought it was an idle tale and did not believe the women.

So, a virgin birth. A dead man walking. Either way, “How can this be?”

It’s a big, serious question. And so, every Christmas and every Easter, in liberal churches like this one, you will hear sermons about how Bethlehem stories are a metaphor for the possibility of new life, and that empty grave stories are, well, a metaphor for the possibility of new life.

Meanwhile, in more conservative evangelical churches sermons will argue for the literal truth of these stories. Preachers will explain how, after not breathing for three days, Jesus gasped, wiggled his toes, and then walked out of his grave without being a zombie.

I don’t say so to mock either liberal or conservative Christians. Like I said, “How can this be?” is a weighty question, a teeter-totter sort of question at the heart of our theological playground. We ought to toss this question around, from time to time.

And yet, this morning I want to suggest that we can focus far too much on such questions of historical fact. In fact, if we become too preoccupied with, “how can this be,” we might miss the rest of the story, the heart of the story, the bulk of Jesus’ life.

It’s like this. My best friend, Nick, has just completed his PhD dissertation in philosophy at Trent University. Nick’s dissertation focusses on the main philosophical difficulties of writing biographies, and the gospels serve as his main example.

Along the way, Nick recalls an event that many of you will remember, the Nixon White House tapes. You see, President Nixon recorded all of his conversations on a tape recorder. Later, these tapes became evidence for the Grand Jury that was investigating Nixon for the Watergate break-in. The tapes were damning conversations about Nixon’s ruthlessness, his disregard for the law, and so on. These tapes were used as evidence in the Watergate Grand Jury.

What really led to President Nixon’s resignation, however, was not the tapes themselves, but an 18½ minute gap in the tapes, during a conversation between Nixon’s chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, and Nixon himself. At the very moment where Nixon was most likely to confess how much he knew about the Watergate break in, the tape goes silent. Rose Mary Woods, his secretary, took the blame for erasing the tape, but Nixon took the fall. He resigned soon after.

It’s not the beginning and end that matter most, in the Nixon Tapes, but the missing piece in the middle.

And, between Christmas and Easter, it sometimes feels to me that much of what really matters, everything between Jesus’ birth and death, has been erased from our Christian consciousness, and we are far poorer for it.

It is the same in the Apostle’s Creed. Twenty years ago, the Creed was still regularly recited here at LPCC. Most of you remember it. The Apostles’ Creed describes Jesus’ life this way: “I believe in Jesus Christ, his son, who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.”

Nothing is said here about Jesus’ baptism by John. Nothing about the parable of the Good Samaritan or the Lost Coin. Nothing about Zacchaeus in his tree or Mary Magdalene forgiven or dinner at Mary and Martha’s. Nothing in the creed about riding a donkey into Jerusalem as an argument against conquering Roman emperors who rode their war horses into Rome.

The Apostle’s Creed moves from Bethlehem to Golgatha as if Luke chapters 3-22 don’t exist. It’s an 18 ½-minute—no an 18½-chapter gap which, if we read it, would convict us, but in an entirely different way than the gap convicted Nixon. If we read and knew what was between Jesus’ birth and death, we would be ever more deeply convicted of Jesus’ worth as someone, the only one, to follow.

So, this Christmas, I invite you to move beyond controversies of beginning and end, about how such things could be, about whether or not Mary was a virgin, whether or not wise men came from the East, whether or not there was a census. I invite you, instead, to read and embrace the rest of the gospel, everything between the beginning in Bethlehem and the end on Golgatha.

You will find there, in the missing 18 ½ chapters, that Jesus says, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”

You will find there that Jesus also says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

You will find there, in the excluded middle, a divine longing to heal the sick, to bind the wounds of the broken hearted, to call out hypocrisy; a longing to forgive people who messed up and to live for the love of your neighbours.

You will find there, in the missing chapters, that Jesus prays, “give us this day our daily bread.”

You will find there, that Jesus says, “Do not worry. Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. . . But seek first the kingdom of God and these things will be given to you as well.”

You will find there, in the middle passages we have erased mostly through neglect, that Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to them.”

It’s beautiful stuff, as moving as a star in the east or a manger filled with straw.

A final, concluding thought. I have to laugh sometimes about the movement to put Christ back into Christmas. I suppose, at some level, I get it. Santa Claus and his pretty elves in their scarlet miniskirts sitting for pictures in the mall, and *Season’s* Greetings, and Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer and Jingle Bells playing on an endless loop, and of course, the “ka-ching!” of our credit cards getting their annual workouts—it is all a bit too cute, too hollow, too distracting. It can be hard to focus on Jesus when so much is going on.

But actually, we shouldn’t blame our culture for doing what it wants to do, and we shouldn’t feel guilty for join in on the fun. Jesus wasn’t a killjoy. But, if we really do want to focus on Jesus, we actually don’t need Christmas or Easter to get started. In fact, instead of worrying about taking Christ out of Christmas, let’s try to think, instead, about how to bring the missing 18 ½ chapters back into the rest of our year.