

Conceived, Born, Suffered

Luke 2:22-35

The Apostles' Creed

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After hearing today's Scripture lesson you may wonder if I have torn some pages off the calendar. We normally hear the second chapter of Luke at Christmas time, and this is Palm Sunday. But for several weeks I have been preaching about the Apostles' Creed, and today I come to the three phrases "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate." All three of those themes are reflected in this encounter between Simeon and Jesus' parents. The Holy Ghost (or, as we say today, the Holy Spirit) brings these people together. The baby born of the Virgin Mary is in his mother's arms. And late in the conversation there is a prediction of suffering, for this child, Simeon says, will be a "sign that will be opposed."

In the oldest versions of the Apostles' Creed the two phrases "conceived by the Holy Ghost" and "born of the virgin Mary" were tied together in one phrase: "born of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary." Together they speak of HUMANITY'S FRESH START IN JESUS CHRIST.

And the need for a fresh start was urgent. The old script was not working, in fact, had never worked. According to Genesis 2, God molded a lifeless lump of clay into a human form and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life. But what a tragic drama has unfolded from that living lump of clay. Think of Cain's hatred for Abel. It led to fratricide, and that killing reverberates still in every pogrom against a minority race, every war between one nation and another, every genocide perpetrated on a conquered people. Cain left a dark and indelible mark on the face of humanity.

Think of Jacob who stole his brother's inheritance by tricking their blind father, Isaac. And how often is that being repeated today in doctored financial reports, under-the-counter bribes, and stock manipulations. The spirit of Jacob is like a virus with no cure.

After God liberated Israel from Egyptian bondage, the Israelis showed their gratitude by turning their backs on God. They convinced Aaron to craft a new god, a golden god, cast in the likeness of a cow, of all things. And must we not admit that we are still crafting idols out of gold, silver and precious stones?

And how does God react when we substitute our self-centered scripts for the original screenplay? Surprisingly, not by closing down the theater but by producing a fresh play with a new leading man. When the church confesses that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary we are stating our belief that Jesus is qualitatively different from Cain, Jacob, Aaron, and from every other sinful, self-centered human who has ever lived. Jesus is a new creation. Jesus starts the human story all over again, and this time he will get it right. This is the man who can say to his detractors, "Which of you accuses me of sin?" And no one dares answers. This is the man who prays in the face of death, "Not my will but thine be done." This is the man who dies praying for his enemies, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." This is the perfect man, the complete man, the man who fulfills in every way the will of God.

Well, you say, that's fine for Jesus. No doubt he lived a life of perfect fidelity and deserves an eternity of bliss. But life here on earth is anything but blissful. Humanity still stumbles from one tragedy to another while God seems not to care.

In Dostoyevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov" Ivan and Aloysha debate whether God exists. Ivan asks, "How can there be a God when children suffer?" He can understand that adults suffer. Their suffering may be due to their own foolishness or recklessness. But a child? How can there be a God if even one child suffers? But Ivan assumes that God is above it all, that God is untouched by pain, that God sits in a celestial mansion sipping afternoon tea while children starve and die on the streets of Moscow.

And the Creed tells us it isn't so. For in addition to humanity's fresh start in Jesus Christ, the Creed speaks of GOD'S SHARED SUFFERING WITH HUMANITY: He "suffered under Pontius Pilate." When Simeon tells Mary that a sword will pierce through her soul, it is a terrifying preview of her son's passion and death. We must understand that it is on the head of God in Christ that the crown of thorns is pressed down, that God in Christ stumbles along the Via Dolorosa bearing the cross, that it is God in Christ who watches his friends melt away out of fear, that it is God in Christ whose hands and feet are pierced with nails.

So there is no pain you will ever suffer that God has not also suffered in Jesus. They used a whip embedded with shards of metal to scourge his back. They pressed on his head a crown whose thorns were as hard as steel. They laid on his back the rugged cross and pierced his side with a spear. They crucified him. "Conceived by the Holy Ghost," yes; "born of the virgin Mary," yes; but also "suffered under Pontius Pilate."

No, Ivan Karamazov, God is not secluded in heaven while children suffer and their parents starve. God does not stand behind a quarantine line when illness strikes or a loved one dies. God is not stationed a hundred miles behind the front lines when grenades are thrown and missiles explode. Where is God when we suffer? Right where God has always been: on the cross, suffering with us and dying for us, and calling on us who are able to take up our crosses, to follow him out into the back alleys of poverty, and the bleak deserts of loneliness, and the cramped quarters of the aged, and the dark rooms of grief.

Which means that this sermon will not conclude inside the sanctuary today. It must continue outside, and not necessarily in great acts of heroism, but in the multitude of little things we do every day, in words of understanding and forgiveness, in deeds of caring and conscience. The living Christ is still abroad in the world, suffering with those who suffer and rejoicing with those who rejoice. Let us join him there, and give him our very best.