

Advent Love: Nativity

In our interfaith series we ended up skipping over Hanukkah due to freezing rain but still, last week we talked about the Winter Solstice and how all of the winter celebrations involve an element of family time. There is a focus on family and friends. Now maybe “family” and “love” don’t always go together for you. However, the Christian celebration of Christmas involves the Nativity. When I say that word, I usually think of some sort of depiction of a little stable with Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. The meaning of Nativity is actually “the occasion or circumstances of being born”. To use it in a sentence, “My nativity took place in Neosho Missouri.” Not nearly as famous as the nativity that allegedly took place in Bethlehem about 10 kilometers south of the city of Jerusalem in what is now Israel. Our Advent Sunday today is Love. So I thought we could look at what the Christian tradition of the nativity of Jesus tells us about love.

The nativity of Jesus and really everyone begins about 9 months or so before the final, big event. Which is not where all the Gospels begin their story. The Gospel of Mark, believed to be the oldest begins with the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his grown-up ministry. The Gospel of Matthew skips to a pregnant Mary. The Gospel of John goes to the beginning of time and then skips to John the Baptist. The Gospel of Luke promises “I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an **orderly** account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.” And Luke begins with the conception of John the Baptist to aging priest Zechariah and his barren wife Elizabeth. Then Luke turns to Elizabeth’s cousin, a young virgin named Mary. *“In the sixth month [of Elizabeth’s pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Well this seemed odd to Mary, being a virgin and all. This bearing a child does not appear to be all that favorable! So Gabriel, being a guy, man-splained the whole virgin birth thing to Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.*

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

I guess I would be ready for the angel to go at that point. So in Luke, Mary goes to visit her cousin and what follows is called Mary’s song of praise which includes: *“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”* Sometimes we refer to a child as “conceived in love” and that is the great desire for all children. The conception of Jesus is portrayed as absolutely conceived in the very Love which **is** God, our true nature and Divine. Love finds a willing vessel in Mary. A being open to whatever may unfold in the material world of judgment and adversity for the sake of surrendering to the activity of Spirit—our oneness with Divine Love. Are we that open? Are we ready to be a vessel?

In the Christian Nativity we begin with absolute Love as the creative force (which we may call the Holy Spirit) and Divine Love expressing through humanity (who we name Mary) as the collaboration necessary for the birth. This is the process for **our** birth! This is the Christ consciousness in us!

I daresay none of **us** has experienced conception through the Holy Spirit. However many of us can probably reflect upon a time when some idea or belief or activity unfolded through us without much effort on our part. It seemed as if it were a divine seed planted in us to grow into manifestation. That is the divine nativity. That is the generosity of divine love that simply asks us to be a vessel—to be willing and open. However surprised we may be; however unlikely our manifestation may be; whatever challenges might arise, we give birth to Light in the darkness. Light with a capital, divine, absolute L. Light that symbolizes the Divine in Hanukkah, Winter Solstice, Christmas, Divali, and other celebrations. Divine Love is the energy of our essence and the energy that binds us together and the energy that moves substance into ideas and into manifestation.

Jesus’ story is perhaps one of the most famous virgin birth stories told. For those creed denominations, it is required that you believe in the virginity of Mary and the divinity of Jesus. Unity believes in the divinity of all beings and I have found a variety of perceptions in Unity around the virginity of Mary. Technically Gabriel says “you will conceive in your womb” and that doesn’t necessarily rule out a man.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you” but it’s a little vague what that looks or feels like. But before we get too focused on virginity, I want to point out that Jesus is not the ONLY virgin birth story.

Many of the legends arising in Egyptian, Zoroastrian, Aztec, Greek and Roman, Hindu and Buddhist culture have virgin births and they still involve some element of the masculine. Christianity is no exception. Maybe it is the Patriarchy that is adverse to leaving men completely out. But Jesus’ nativity includes Joseph. What role does Joseph have in understanding love? For that story we have to go to Matthew’s gospel.

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Gabriel is not here to man-splain how “dismissing her quietly” is the loving thing to do but apparently a different, unnamed angel intervened. Most marriages were arranged in the time of Jesus. Joseph was older, a carpenter and Mary was young and lovely. I am guessing Joseph thought he was getting a good deal until this baby thing came up. Then he had some second thoughts. Males represent intellect in metaphysical interpretation. When human love stays up in our head we tend to judge by appearance and our love is conditional. None of this “sickness and health” “for richer or poorer” business. Conditional love says I will love you so long as it is easy. Joseph continued to hedge his bets as he kept his distance until the baby was born—so he could disown the product of this virgin conception if it came out wonky.

Still, here’s what I can say in Joseph’s defense: he did marry Mary. Maybe over the protests of other family and friends. He demonstrated faith in the direction of the angel—spiritual guidance. He protected the baby when advised the baby was in danger from Herod and took his little family to Egypt.

He raised this odd child with the quirky habits of hanging out in the temple even if he wasn't his child. There is nothing in the Gospels to say that Jesus was not loved by Joseph or that Jesus lacked a healthy childhood.

I think Joseph did the best he could with his conditional love. What about Mary? Once she conceived in love—did that love continue? In the *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary*, Charles Fillmore says, “Mary the mother of Jesus represents the soul that magnifies the Lord ‘daily in the temple’ and through its devotions prepares itself for the higher life. She signifies the *divine motherhood of love*. She can also be said to be intuition.”

Some of us have issues with our fathers and find God the Father to be problematic. Some of us have issues with our mothers and find God the Mother or the idea of Divine Motherhood of Love to be problematic. But let's imagine what ideal mothering feels like. Ok, maybe there's a little nagging, like when Mary told Jesus to turn the water into wine at the wedding, but a good mother sometimes believes in us and pushes us to be our best. That might feel like nagging. Imagine having to stay at a cross while your child dies. And some of us may feel like we have been through that process with our children. Human love gets tested. Lots. Not every parent rises to the level of Mary. In the nativity, Mary represents consistent human love, tested by material conditions and remaining grounded in spiritual love. Mary represents the human love we long to experience from others and the human love we aspire to be.

Metaphysically, we are all the characters in the story. We are divine love expressing, the Christ born anew in our conscious awareness. We are vessels, open and receptive to the activity of Spirit ready to manifest through us. We are conditional love, listening for guidance and sometimes holding back because of appearances and worldly conditions. We are unconditional, human love, tested time and again and giving love, being love in the world.

This holiday season I invite you to reflect on the nativity story and all the love you are!