

The Litmus Test

Luke 1:26-38

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Can I ask you a loaded question?

How do you feel about Christmas music?

In our house, we have been listening to Christmas music non-stop since before Thanksgiving. I wish there was a way to not throw Christen under the bus here, but it's not been my choice.

The other day we were cooking dinner and I picked up my phone to play some music to our bluetooth speaker. Christen literally stopped chopping the onion, watched me pick up my phone, and, with the knife still in her hand, said, "What are you doing?"

"I'm putting on some music..."

And with a look in her eye that made you wonder what she might do to you with that knife if you answered incorrectly, she asked, "What kind music?"

There was only one right answer. "Christmas music, I guess??"

"Oh, OK!" she said, and, in the blink of an eye, transformed back into the wonderful, loving person you all know her to be.

Christmas music is sensitive subject in our house, but only for a few weeks a year. But others have devoted far too much of their lives to disparaging Christmas music. One website serves the sole purpose of identifying the worst Christmas carol. It begins with three questions:

- What Christmas song causes you to run screaming from the room when it comes on the radio? (That's an easy one for me: "Dominic, the Donkey")
- Which carol makes you grimace when a friend suggests it?
- Which song prompts you to start boiling the vat of oil to pour from the roof when the carolers out front begin singing?

Here is a sample of what voters said about some of what I assume could be your favorite Christmas songs:

Of *O Christmas Tree* — "If you're six years old maybe singing to a tree seems like a good idea, but to anybody else it's a little embarrassing."

Of *Jingle Bell Rock* — "The song makes me gag. The lyrics imply that it's a rock song and therefore cool. It's not a rock song and it isn't cool."

According to the poll, the second worst Christmas carol, with ten percent of the votes, is *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. Some of the comments: "The Twelve Days of Christmas? Twelve thumbs down." "About four minutes too long." "Maybe a pear tree would be nice, but keep the bird away from the pears."

Can you guess which Christmas carol the poll decided was the worst? With 23% of the votes, grinchers like me said the worst Christmas carol is *The Little Drummer Boy*.

One person (who I assume was a baptist) commented:

"There is no biblical precedent. The shepherds don't want a kid beating a drum when they're trying to calm the sheep. Imagine Mary saying, 'I just got the baby to sleep, and here comes that stupid kid with the drum again.'"

Some of the comments were more technical in nature. This one was perhaps a choir member (or choir director, Victoria??):

"With a musical range of exactly seven notes, a scale-like melody that only a first-year piano student could love, and repetitive, mind-numbing lyrics, this song is the musical equivalent of watching paint dry."

This one sounds like Mike Oldham to me: "I believe this song is played nonstop in one of Dante's circles of hell."

And as the resident grinch in our house, I can actually kind of relate with this next one: "My husband actually likes this song. I'm not sure I can stay married to him after finding this out."

Now, I know what's happening out there. I know what's going through your head. You are wondering who could possibly hate Christmas this much. What happened to them as children that they would devote so much energy to "trolling" Christmas carols? Maybe they had a drum as a kid, but their mom wouldn't let them play it. Maybe they were attacked by a partridge or a Christmas tree fell on them.

Whatever the case, who knew that Christmas could be so controversial?

And that's the thing, isn't it? We Christians ought to know. We ought to know better than anyone how controversial Christmas can be, because we don't even get to the birth of Jesus in Luke's gospel before the controversy begins.

Let me say two words and you see how you react: *virgin birth*.

Now I haven't set up an online poll, but I bet the many of us love those two words and can't imagine Christmas without them, but I also bet about 23% or so of us faithful Christians cringe every time those two words are uttered.

The angel Gabriel visits Mary and says:

“Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold! You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus” (Luke 1:30-31).

Mary, probably only 13-years old or so, asks, “How will this be, since I have not known a man?”

The NRSV says, “since I am a virgin,” but the actual Greek says, “since I have not known a man.” It’s a biblical euphemism used throughout scripture to talk about intimate physical relations.

Gabriel answers her question by explaining that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the most high will overshadow her. In other words, it is all very mysterious and is meant to be understood as miraculous and not something eighth-grade health class could explain.

As Luke tells it, Mary consents to God’s will, saying: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). With that Gabriel departs, and for centuries we have been left fighting about the doctrine of the virgin birth.

Was Jesus really conceived by a biological virgin and God’s divine intervention? Or have the writer’s of Matthew and Luke used the powerful metaphor of “virgin birth” to point to and signify Jesus’ importance? Can you even be a Christian if you don’t believe in the virgin birth?

As a child, my church would have answered that last question with a resounding, “NO!” But they may have also told you that they believed the earth was created in six 24-hour days just over 6,000 years ago. What do we do when science and reason run head first into the claims of scripture?

Historically, we Christians have done one of two things. We have either modeled Thomas Jefferson, who famously used a razor to cut out every verse in his Bible that went defied reason and rational thought, or we have defaulted to a posture of denying reason and saying things like, “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”

Do you see how those two responses are polarities to one another?

One says, if it’s not rational I must remove it from my Bible, and therefore resolve the tension I feel about it, while the other says, if the Bible says it, then I must suspend rational thought in order to remove the tension I feel about it.

And, thus, neither is a faithful reading of scripture, because scripture is meant to make us wrestle — to wrestle with what we believe, in what we place our trust, in how we will choose to live. Despite what some preachers will try to convince you of, the Bible is not an instruction manual. It is a wrestling rink. It is meant to bend us and, at times,

throw us to the ground because of what it reveals to be true about God and what it reveals to be true about us.

Several years ago now, *The Christian Century*, a long-running magazine that focuses on topics relevant to Christians published two articles side-by-side on the virgin birth.

The first was written by the well-known theologian and thinker, N.T. Wright, in which he asserts his case for believing in the historical and miraculous conception and birth of Jesus. I won't try to sum it up for you here, but his argument is thoughtful, compelling, and it ultimately rests on his belief in the resurrection. If he can believe that God can bring Jesus back from the dead, then why couldn't God also bring him into the world to start with?

Then, as soon as you finish N.T. Wright's case for the virgin birth being a historical event, the very next page is New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg's case for understanding the virgin birth as a metaphor meant to express central truths about Jesus' significance. His case was also thoughtful and compelling, and relied heavily on the close examination of scripture. He points out how very different Matthew and Luke's versions are to one another. He also points out that Paul seems to have no knowledge of the virgin birth, and Paul was writing between thirty and forty years before Matthew and Luke were written. And so Borg concludes that the story of Jesus virginal conception was a metaphor affirming Jesus' identity and significance as God's son.

Two faithful scholars who wrestled with the same passage of scripture and came out in two different places. Does that sound like a familiar story?

Maybe you have experienced that somewhere, too. Maybe it was in Sunday School. Maybe in a Bible study with friends. Maybe around the kitchen table with your spouse or family. Maybe it happened internally as you listened to one of my sermons. Maybe it's happening to you right now.

Unfortunately, too often this story (like the creation story) has been used as a litmus test for those who want to determine, on one side, whether you really are a Christian or not, and on the other, whether you are rational human being or not.

Are you in or are you out? Are you on my side or on their side? Are you on the side of faith or the side of reason?

But *the story* isn't about that, is it?

That's the problem with these arguments. They are so focused on the "how" — how did Jesus come into this world: miraculously or biologically? — that they completely miss the point. The point of the story isn't *how*, but *Who*.

And the *Who* of the story is *Emmanuel* — the God-with-us One. The story is about our cosmic, transcendent God whose movement is toward us; who moves in our direction; whose compass doesn't point northward, but human-ward. Our God is Emmanuel — the one who is always moving toward us. It's about the *Who*.

And this is the most humbling part: God doesn't do it alone — not even when God wants to enter the world in human form. The testimony of the Bible from cover-to-cover is of a God who chooses to work redemption in this world through willing partners.

In this story, God's willing partner is a thirteen-year old girl who had nothing to gain and everything to lose by saying yes, but she said "yes" anyway. And because of that, she has rightly become a model of Christian servanthood for us since the earliest days of the Church.

In fact, in the fifth century, Christians began calling her *Theotokos*, which means "God-bearer." What a title to be given, right? *Theotokos*: the one who said "yes" to God and bore new life in this world. In those early centuries of the church, some baptisteries were circular, suggesting the shape of the womb. It was meant to convey two things: first, that in baptism we are born into new life, and, second, that through baptism we are to become a *Theotokos*, too.

We are to become bearers of God in this world.

The well-known Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, tells the story of a visit he made to Botswana several years ago. He was there visiting the ministries of several local churches. One day he found himself at St. Peter's Parish in the capitol city. The church had opened a daycare center for the neighborhood children.

He said that as they pulled into the courtyard, the children were on the other side gathered under the shade of the trees. The children saw the guests pull in, stopped their lessons, stood up and began to welcome the vans by singing, "Good morning to you."

After they had had a moment to get acquainted with some of the children, Father Andrew invited Bishop Curry to tell some Bible stories. So he sat down and did so. And afterwards it was time for the kids to go play. They ran off in the direction of the swings and the monkey bars — everybody except one little girl.

She got up slowly. She had one of those crutches — you know, the kind that you slip around your forearm and then reach down to the handle. She staked that crutch in the ground and pulled herself up. She had shorts on, and you could see her weak legs trying to walk. And she walked haltingly, but with a sense of determination.

And once she started moving, she picked up a little speed. But then she fell.

He said, "You wanted to go get her, to pick her up — but you knew you had to let her do it herself."

She took that crutch, staked it in the ground, pulled herself up, and again began to walk.

He said that while she walked, he asked Father Andrew her story. It turned out that both of her parents had died, and she was being taken care of by her grandparents. The grandparents did the very best that they could with the few resources they had, but when the director of the daycare came to inquire about the little girl, she found that little girl had lived her entire life in bed. She had never gone outside to play. Never sat at the table. She was completely non-ambulatory and unable to walk.

Father Andrew and the director of the day care met with the family. They convinced the grandparents to let the church be part of her life. The church sent physical therapists and nurses to work with the girl. They brought her to the daycare. And, ultimately, they had brought her to a place where she had learned to walk using that crutch.

By this point, the little girl had caught up with the other children and was laughing and playing. Bishop Curry says that Father Andrew then said something he would never forget. He said, "We believe that God has something better in store for every child, and it's our job to help that child find out what it is and then *live*."

You see, when we pay attention to the right part of the story, we discover that the *Theotokos* — the God bearer — is still alive, only her name isn't Mary anymore. Her name is Church. And her image as bearer of God shines brightest whenever she is about the business of bearing life in this world.

And *that* is the litmus test that God cares about — not whether we believe in a seven day creation or a virgin birth — but whether we are willing to become "God bearers" in this world.

The One who comes to us in Jesus, comes to us still — asking us to be a vessel for redemption in this world.

And that, as far as I'm concerned, is always the point of the virgin birth.

Amen.