

WGUMC June 22, 2014 Apostles' Creed, Article 2
"conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary"
Matthew 1:18-25 and Mark 1:9-13

I sometimes do funerals for people that I don't know and folks will ask me how I do it. It's simple, really. I gather any available family members and sit down with them for a few hours and ask them to tell me the stories. It's amazing how quickly you can get to know a person you have never met through the stories that others tell about them.

Jesus and the Apostles were long dead when the Apostles' Creed was written. The people who first used the Creed had never met Jesus, yet they knew the stories about him. What the Creed does is sum up those stories and pass them down to us, so that we, too, may get to know him.

So when the Creed says, he was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary," it's telling us a story about Jesus, who he was and who he is. That story sums up how Jesus came to be the Son of God by way of the Holy Spirit.

This would seem to be pretty big news, so it's curious that the first Gospel to be written, the Gospel of Mark, doesn't bother to mention it. In fact, only two of the four Gospels tell the story of Jesus' birth. And, in telling it, one of them (Matthew) misquotes the Bible! Actually, it quotes the Greek version of Isaiah 7:14. It says, "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son" when the original Hebrew of that verse uses a more general term, "young woman." Now the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, was the more familiar version for the early Christians, "virgin" is not a very precise translation.

But that's not the only question about the virgin birth story. Paul's letters, which are the earliest writings we have in the New Testament, don't mention it, either. According to Paul, Jesus was the one "who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness *by resurrection from the*

dead." [Romans 1:3-4] For Paul, it wasn't how Jesus was born in the flesh, but how Jesus was raised in power that made him the Son of God. You could say that the resurrection carries more theological weight than the incarnation.

So for those who can't quite buy into the story of the virgin birth, but want to hold onto the story of the Son of God, I suggest that you pay attention to the story of the Holy Spirit. The truth in all of these stories is the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's story begins with the very first verses of Genesis and continues on to the very last verses in Revelation. And we can't tell the story of Jesus without the story of the Spirit. So today, I'm going to ask the children to help me tell it.

Let's begin with Chapter One: Creation. In the beginning, we have the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters on the first day of Creation [Genesis 1:2]. [Children] But the Spirit is not all alone here. As it says in John 1: "In the beginning was [also] the Word and the Word was with God...All things

came into being through [the Word], and without [the Word] not one thing came into being." [John 1:1] For those of you who are confused, the Word is Jesus Christ, so here is our first glimpse of the Holy Trinity. God the Spirit and God the Son working together with God the Father on the first day of Creation.

Moving on to Chapter Two: the Inspiration. The next scene is the Spirit anointing the judges, kings, and prophets of Israel. [Children] The Hebrew Bible is filled with stories telling us how the Spirit works in the world: by calling and equipping leaders to do great things for God. So, the Bible says, the spirit of the Lord "took possession" of Gideon [Judges 6:34]; "came mightily" on David [I Samuel 16:13]; and "entered into" the Prophet Ezekiel [Ezekiel 2:2].

All of this Holy activity in the Hebrew Bible sets the stage for Chapter Three: the Incarnation. This is where the Spirit

enters into Mary and the man Jesus becomes a part of the Spirit story. [children]

In the Gospel of Luke, the Angel Gabriel says that the Holy Spirit will overshadow Mary and she will conceive a son. What a conception! What a crazy idea! What this means biologically, I honestly don't care. But what it means theologically is that somehow (and I don't need to know how) the divine life has entered into human life. I don't need to know how the Word became flesh; I only need to know that God would do anything to dwell among us.

But the Spirit wasn't finished with the birth of Jesus. Let's read Chapter Four: the Baptism. [children] Many early Christians believed that Jesus became the Son of God, not at his birth but at his baptism. Now all four Gospels tell the story of his baptism. Apparently, the baptism was more important than the birth. In fact, in the Gospel of Mark "the beginning of the good news" is the story of the baptism: "And just as he

was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." [Mark 1:1,10-11] Scholars call this moment the adoption of Jesus into the Sonship of God.

But the Spirit wasn't finished with the baptism, either.

Chapter 5: The Temptation. Immediately, that same Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, to be tested and trained so that he was ready to do everything he was going to be asked to do. [Mark 1:12-13] [children] Jesus did in 40 days what takes most of us twice 40 years to do: get ready for God!

But the Spirit wasn't finished with the temptation.

Chapter 6: The Proclamation. Now Jesus was ready to take up the prophet's mantle and follow in the grand tradition of spirit-filled messengers of God by returning to his hometown of Nazareth and standing in the synagogue to read the words of

Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; ...has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners....” [Luke 4:18]

[children] Kids, Jesus didn't just do all these good things because he was a good guy. Jesus brought liberation and salvation because he was anointed by the Spirit for this work.

But the Spirit wasn't finished with the ministry of Jesus. Chapter 7: Pentecost. When he gathered with his friends before he died, he told them that he was going away from them. But he told them not to lose heart, for he would not abandon them. He was sending the Holy Spirit to be with them always. And after he was raised from the dead, the Holy Spirit came down to be with them and with us. [children, who are these people?]

And the Spirit isn't finished with us! The story didn't end with Pentecost. It didn't end with the Book of Revelation. The Spirit's story became the story of the Christian Church. It is our

story. It is our history. But it is also our present and our future.

The next chapter of this story is the one that you are writing.

[children]

So the truth of the story of the virgin birth is that God has entered into our lives, and the Holy Spirit is even now putting pen to paper, and let me tell you, this one's going to be a whopper! O, if only we would let the Spirit's power overshadow us and conceive in us a life that we could never imagine, a story that we could never write on our own.

Cecil Williams, founder of Glide Church, told some of his Spirit story to the Annual Conference on Wednesday night. Through all his years of working with the homeless, the hopeless, the prostitutes and AIDS patients and all of the other unlovables that he had been privileged to love, he has lived by one principle: God never gives up on anyone, and neither will he.

I listened with appreciation that night but didn't participate much in Annual Conference the next day because I

spent much of the day on the phone trying to get help for someone who believes that everyone has given up on them. I told them that that isn't going to happen. God is not and we are not giving up on them.

We've all been there, too. We have been in that place where life was just too much for us: the list was too long and the time was too short; our problems too big and our bank account too small; our anxieties too high and our expectations too low; our fears too strong and our faith too weak; our demons too close and our God too far away.

But that seemingly distant God isn't giving up on us on this or any other day. And we can believe that because we believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was conceived, baptized, led into the wilderness, anointed to preach, and empowered to heal by the Holy Spirit. And that same powerful Spirit has been given to us, because the Spirit isn't finished with us. While we have to come to the end of the

sermon, we will never come to the end of the story. Do you believe it? Thanks be to God!