

MRS. JESUS
(PART ONE OF A FIVE PART SERMON SERIES—JESUS: THEN AND NOW)

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
First Congregational Church of Lebanon
Lebanon, N.H.
23 September 2012*

Matthew 1.18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. 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.

Luke 2.1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

This past Tuesday I received a number of email alerts calling my attention to a discovery of signal importance in the world of biblical studies: Karen King, a professor at Harvard Divinity School, shared news of a fourth century papyrus that seems to contain a reference by Jesus to “my wife.” Further, the text appears to have him say, “she will be able to be my disciple.” And, to top it all off, we learn text refers to Mary in a way that indicates she would be, well, Mrs. Jesus.

So.

There we have it.

Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married.

And while the text doesn't say it, maybe the *Da Vinci Code* had it right. Maybe Jesus and Mary made their way to Europe, where they started a family that would culminate in the Merovingian dynasty that ruled France for 300 years in the early Middle Ages until they were deposed by the Carolingians with the blessing of none other than the Pope, the supposed Vicar of Christ. Dan Brown fans, step forward and rejoice, say, "I told you so." The canonical Gospels have it all wrong. The Church has missed the plot. Now is your moment.

Well, maybe it's not quite your moment.

There's the small problem that all of this comes not from a full-fledged Gospel, even if that's the term that's been bandied about in the press, but a small fragment whose provenance is unknown, actual age has yet to be confirmed, and authenticity is being questioned by some scholars of Coptic church history and linguistics.

Further, as Father James Martin noted in a piece that ran in the Times the day after the news broke, it is rather strange that none of the Gospels speak of Jesus' wife, especially when it would seem right and appropriate for them to do so. Consider: if the authors of the four Gospels saw fit to mention his siblings and mother, why not make reference to Jesus' wife? The answer is obvious: clearly, Jesus was not married.

Traditionalists, come forward! Declare your vindication! Your time has come.

Well, maybe it hasn't quite come yet.

You see, while the preponderance of evidence and tradition weigh heavily on the unmarried-Jesus side of the scales, we cannot offer an unassailable, definitive, 100-percent accurate declaration that he was single.

For the simple fact is we don't know.

And, if we are to be honest, we must admit that whether Jesus was single or married is just one of many things we don't know about him.

We don't know whether he was short or tall, thin or fat, whether he had a strong or weak chin, a snub nose or one that was long and straight. We don't know if his voice was high pitched or deep, nor do we know the color of his hair or his eyes—though it's a fair bet that centuries of glorious, transcendent Western European art, some of it intimately familiar to most of us here, have got it wrong. And given all of the arguing about the place of gays and

lesbians in the wider church today, we might take a moment to consider that we don't actually know anything about Jesus' sexual orientation.

Jesus could have been athletically gifted. He could have had an awful singing voice. We don't know.

The Gospels address none of these subjects.

Even when they do comment on things, they don't always agree. Did you pay attention to those birth narratives? I chose those readings this morning in the hope that you would notice the differences between the two accounts. To begin with, Luke has a census and a manger. Not Matthew. And if you go further into the surrounding verses, you'll see other variations, like two quite different genealogies, not to mention the shepherds in Luke and the Magi in Matthew. But the birth narratives of Luke and Matthew read like identical texts when compared with that between those two Gospels and Mark and John. Look at Mark, and you'll find nothing about Jesus' birth. And John? Well, he listens to his own muse and offers a mystical, almost cosmic take on Jesus' origins.

What of other writers?

Paul, writing about Jesus just twenty or so years after the Crucifixion has nothing to say about Jesus' nativity nor any of the other topics we've raised. And the few non-Christian ancient sources about Christ and early Christianity like Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and Josephus are silent, too.

There's really so much about Jesus we don't know.

That was a point made repeatedly and forcefully by one of my divinity school professors, a renowned scholar of the historical Jesus and, I should note, an active lay leader in his local Lutheran church. We really know very, very little about Jesus, we were told. In one sense, as we've noted already, this is true. Yet consider what we do know about Jesus:

For starters, there's his name. This may not seem like much, but consider just how few individuals we can even identify from the early decades of the first century. Jesus wasn't a king or general or high-ranking official; he wasn't a famous sculptor or poet. Yet of the estimated two to three hundred million people alive at the time, the vast majority of whom remain unknown and anonymous to us, Jesus is one of the few we can name.

And not only name!

We also know that he was an innovative religious figure of consequence, that he caught the attention of the authorities in such a way that he soon entered the historical record, that what he taught and did quickly compelled the attention, loyalty and devotion of a diverse group across a sprawling empire.

Still, for the sake of discussion, let's proceed from the proposition that we really know very, very little about Jesus. This still begs the question, "So what?"

So what if we don't know much about Jesus, the historical person? Does it matter?

Think about it.

If we are orthodox, Trinitarian Christians we make some claims about Jesus including this: he was fully human and fully divine. The first part of that assertion means Jesus lived and Jesus died. That he walked the earth just as you and I do today. Jesus, we believe—we know—was real, as real as Augustus Caesar or Clara Barton, as real as Abraham Lincoln or Lady Gaga, as real as Karl or Groucho Marx.

We just don't know if he was married.

And it really doesn't matter.

If this is the case, though, why raise the issue? Why spend time talking about Jesus' marital status?

Because my hope and prayer is that over the last few minutes I may have encouraged you to step back from your familiar preconceptions about who Jesus *was* so that you might gain new perspectives and insights into who he *is*, that thinking about Jesus *then*, we will be prepared to engage with Jesus *now*.

I can't even begin to imagine what it might have been like to be one of the people in one of those crowds who gathered around Jesus to hear him preach, let alone fathom what it was to be one of the disciples, who lived and traveled with him. What an experience! What a blessing!

Yet you and I enjoy an experience and a blessing that was not available to those who knew, encountered, met or saw Jesus—we come to him without distractions. We don't find ourselves focusing on the way he combs his hair, what his accent says about his background, the cut of his clothes, or whether we find his friends (or his wife) to be an asset or a liability. We don't judge him by whether he seems nice, whether we'd want to look at him on our TVs or computer monitors for the next four years or whether we'd want to enjoy a beer with him. We simply don't have that option.

All we can do is look back to the man of Galilee who preached the word of God to all who would listen; taught anyone willing to know what it was God called them to do; healed those who were ill, regardless of their station in life; and who articulated a radically fresh vision of the Kingdom of Heaven rooted in the ancient tradition of Israel.

When we do this, if we do it with open eyes, open hearts, and open minds, we should be shocked. For the Jesus we will meet will be one who comforts us yet challenges us, who draws us in yet puts us on our guard, who is reassuringly familiar yet utterly strange.

This past summer while we were in London, Rachel and I went to St. Martin-in-the-Fields for a concert. Now, a bit of background is in order here: I have some history with St. Martins. Or perhaps I should say I have some powerful memories. In years past, I have worshiped there, indeed may have taken the most meaningful communion of my life there early on a mid-spring Sunday morning in a side chapel with a priest and two street people, and I have enjoyed music there, including a performance of Beethoven's fourth piano concerto the memory of which still stirs me after more than a decade. This, you see, is a place that has made an impression on me.

And so I will confess to being stunned when we entered the sanctuary one evening this past August and I took in the East Window above the altar.

It had been changed since I had last been in London.

And I mean *changed*.

Yes, I knew there was a renewal plan for the church and its campus and I will say that the building and new spaces were looking grand and fit to purpose, befitting a place that is active house of worship, vibrant center of cultural life, and vital provider of services to those in need.

But the window!

My God! I thought. *What were they thinking?*

Here, at the visual center of James Gibbs' beautiful Baroque church, whose design was rooted in the classical vernacular, an expression of order, of balance, of straight lines and grids and perfect proportions and forms, was this new window.

The new design still employed the familiar windowpane grid, but with a critical difference: in the middle was an off-centered oval – softly illuminated, no less! – one that not only interrupted the grid, but distorted it.

My initial reaction was one of visceral loathing. But short of leaving before the concert had even begun or sitting there with my eyes closed for the better part of two hours, I had no choice but to look at the offending window.

And as the music of Corelli and Vivaldi filled the sanctuary, something happened. I looked at the window, and contemplated what I saw and I knew then I had been touched by God's grace.

You see, that evening this remarkable window, designed by Shirazeh Houshiary, had made visible what Jesus and the cross mean to me. Here, in the heart of an eighteenth-century church designed by a Catholic man was a twenty-first century window created by an Iranian-born woman, a window that represented how Jesus draws us in to his heart, but in doing so, changes us and all around us. Here, I saw how Jesus takes all of our neatly ordered assumptions and, if we allow him, disrupts them, and us. Here, I saw how Jesus, when he is at the center of our attention, is able, again if we are willing, to transform us.

It was with great joy and excitement that I found myself before the altar, beneath that window, taking communion the following two Sundays. It was with excitement that I carried this experience back to the Upper Valley, inspired to join with you on a journey these next few weeks as we explore Jesus in worship, and the forum, and adult ed, and Sunday school, all in the hope and with the prayer that when we are done, we will be in a place where we as individuals and as a community are enabled to begin to see and know Jesus in new and transforming ways.

Which brings us back to Mrs. Jesus.

Did she exist?

Probably not, but we'll never know.

Does it matter?

Not a whit.

For whether Jesus was married or single, short or tall, thin or fat, handsome or ugly, straight or gay, he was still Emmanuel, God-with-us, the incarnation of the Creator's love, come among us, bearing grace unbounded, hope restored, and the promise of life made new.