

This past week, Joan was talking with the mother of one her library kids, an eight-year-old girl in the third grade. A really bright young child. The little girl had sat down with her mother this past week and told her she was having serious misgivings about the existence of Santa Claus.

“I need proof,” she told her mother.

“Well,” her mother asked, “what kind of proof are you talking about?”

“I’ll need to see a photograph of Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer,” the girl said. Apparently, she had given this a great deal of thought.

So the mother was relating this to Joan, laughing about it, but also a little concerned, because they also had a five-year-old at home and didn’t want their older daughter to spoil things for their younger child.

Well, just last Saturday Joan and I had been downtown and there was this elf standing on a street corner, with a real-live reindeer. We had no idea what he was doing there. There were no other elves or reindeers anywhere else. Santa was nowhere around. Just this one elf, standing on the street corner next to his reindeer, like he was lost, like he’d gotten off at the wrong bus stop and gotten separated from the other elves. He was just standing there, holding a rope in his hand, with the reindeer on the other end of the rope. So Joan took their picture.

The mother asked Joan, “Where in the world am I going to find a photograph of a reindeer?”

Joan said, “Got you covered.” And went to CVS that night, got the picture developed, and gave it to the mother, who showed it to her eight-year-old daughter, who scrutinized it, then pronounced it the genuine article, the real deal. So the grand tradition of Santa Claus is safe for another year.

I can sympathize with that little girl. Sometimes we just want proof of something. I read the Bible like that for a lot of years. I’d read about Moses parting the sea or Jesus feeding five thousand people with a handful of fish and bread and think to myself that it wasn’t true and dismiss the story, thinking if stories weren’t literally true then they had no value.

It eventually occurred to me that that was the same all-or-nothing approach to the Bible that has always concerned me about Christian fundamentalism. Same coin, different side. That’s when I began reading the Bible differently. Instead of reading a story and asking, “What proof is there that this story is literally and historically accurate?” I began to read the stories and say, “That’s an interesting story. I wonder if there is a lesson in it for me?”

So I was thinking about the virgin birth the other day—it's that time of year—and wondered how important the virgin birth was to people's faith. We know at one time it was, but I wondered if it still was. So I did what all theologians do. I went on Facebook and asked my Facebook friends how central the virgin birth was to their faith. I got back quite a few answers, many of them very thoughtful. A few people were upset that I'd even asked the question. One Southern Baptist minister "unfriended" me for broaching the subject. I've never been good at that "boundary" thing.

A woman named Sharon said the story of the virgin birth was patriarchal and chauvinistic, that women are always expected to be virgins, to be innocent, but men aren't, and there's a double standard. Yes, that is a regrettable reality of history that continues to this day. Women have been held to a different moral standard than men. But another woman, a Quaker named Susan, wrote that she had interpreted the story of the virgin birth differently. She said, "It's one of the first significant times in the Bible where God dealt with a woman directly without a man being involved. For one of the first times, a man wasn't needed to serve as the interpreter or mediator between God and women."

She said she felt honored and affirmed by the story.

Well, that's a neat way of looking at it that I had never considered before. When you think about it, it makes a great deal of sense, because throughout the Bible, God had a way of doing wonderful, surprising things through marginalized, ostracized people.

There is an ancient prayer that contains the line, "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has not created me a woman." That was the spiritual climate of Mary's day. Yet, here is this wonderful tradition, this beautiful story, where God honors the integrity and innocence of a young Jewish woman by partnering with her to bring Jesus into a world where men thanked God for not having them be born a woman.

No more would a man have to serve as a mediator between God and women. With Mary and Jesus, God changed the playing field. The applecart was nicely balanced, and God tipped it over. God has a way of doing this. We create these conventions, these customs, these traditions, these rituals, and say, "This is how God works. This is how God relates to us. This is the procedure by which God is encountered." And God says, "Wanna bet?" Then God turns to someone we least expect, someone on the sidelines, someone we've rejected or scorned, and does something beautiful through them.

Pay very close attention to the people and groups of people you don't admire or respect. God might use them to teach you something.

When the adults in the time of Eli had grown deaf and God had fallen silent, God spoke to a child named Samuel and Samuel listened and Israel was renewed.

Jonah hated the Ninehvites, so God used them to teach Jonah about repentance and grace.

When women were despised and objectified and vilified, Mary found favor with God.

When the disciples of Jesus scorned the Gentiles, Jesus said of a Roman centurion, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith as his."

Before Saul became Paul, he despised Stephen and consented to his death. Then God used Stephen to teach Paul what it meant to have courage.

Pay very close attention to the people and groups of people you don't admire or respect. God will use them to teach you something.

Yesterday, the yearly meeting had a worship service. Because my recent interactions in the yearly meeting have not been positive, I didn't want to go. But I felt like I should, so I went, but got there late and sat at the back. When I sat down, I hadn't noticed that the man next to me was from a meeting that had wanted me to lose my pastoral credentials, so when I saw him I thought, "Oh, great," and wished I'd stayed home.

Everyone was singing a hymn when I walked in and I didn't know the number. I was thumbing through the hymnal trying to find it, and that man approached me and smiled and handed me his songbook. Then we settled into silence and after about 20 minutes of silence that same man stood and prayed, and it was a beautiful prayer of forgiveness and grace. Then he spoke briefly about some alienated teenagers in his town and how important they had become to him, and asked if we could remember those young people in our prayers and make an effort to befriend young people in our own towns. It was just so gracious, and I felt my heart softening toward this man who I'd thought had nothing to offer.

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