

## THE WAY OF NOT KNOWING

Texts on Sunday, December 18, 2011

*Isaiah 7: 10-16; Luke 1: 26-38*

I share at least one point of theology with the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick, the founding minister of The Riverside Church. With Fosdick—and, I imagine, with many of you—I hold that the teaching that Jesus was literally born of a virgin is not an essential of Christian faith. Faith can thrive in the presence of the hunch that “virgin Mary mother mild” is a myth. In the early 1920s, Fosdick’s free interpretation of the faith stirred bitter controversy in the mainline church, such as that thought could never stir today. To be sure, Christian camps are still divided over the symbol of the virgin birth, some treating it as a bar for true believers, others as false or a fable or sorely messed-up moral instruction. Either way, there is not much struggle in the contest now. We just don’t talk about it. But let’s talk!

Suppose both approaches to the story of the virgin birth fail in spiritual purpose; the one holding the Bible so close that its depth cannot be seen, the other casting it aside like a comic book whenever the stories strain credulity. Suppose the virgin birth is both a legend *and* true. I commend this as a first approach to most Bible stories. Think of them as “godly fiction.” If fiction, then read the stories as you read fiction; that is, accept that the author intends every detail just as you find it. There is no going behind the text to figure out “what really happened,” for the story is given just as it is by the author, whom you must trust to take you where the story is going. And if the fictions are godly, then the authorship you are entrusting yourself to is somehow God’s authorship; which means, unlike ordinary fictions, those of the Bible are composed expressly for your good. Therefore, do not worry that servants of God made stories from materials mere memory could not carry. The fact is—we have walked this terrain before—the *fact* is that long generations of mothers and fathers before you trusted and found God bearing gifts with these stories, treasures more valuable than could ever be fashioned from facts. Let us open what we have been given.

In response to a word from an angel that she will take part in a new thing, to bring life among the ruins, a young woman says “How can this be?” She does not know an answer. She knows the facts of life enough to add, “since I have known no man.” Unlike great-grandmother Sarah, who laughed at the messenger bringing news of her coming son, Mary wonders. In other words, Mary trusts her messenger. *How can this be?* Have you stood in a like relationship to a mystery about the importance of you to the world?

I have a long acquaintance with a strange messenger. Were I denizen of a different age, I might call it an angel, or name it. As it is, I just call my

visitor the spirit of boredom. It comes to me as I am preparing the sermon, almost every week. Mostly in the middle of the night it comes. It says, "Preacher, this is boring." That's all; then leaves. At first, I was afraid of this spirit, but not for a long time now. I consider it a holy spirit; that is, a spirit of pure good will, like the one who helped evangelists write their gospels. So what do you suppose I do after a holy spirit of boredom visits me in my study? Of course! I stop writing. I cut and do not paste. I wonder. I wait.

Wherever it comes in our life, boredom has a straightforward meaning, like a finger waving: *Do not continue in **this** direction. Empty yourself of all you thought you knew. Open to the new thing, which I am already doing. Do you not perceive it?* Over a quarter century, I have had perhaps a thousand visits from the spirit of boredom. We are on good terms. I do not try to bar the door. I never argue. But often I have wondered, How can this be, since I have no manuscript? From this experience, I have learned, little by little, the practice of faith as a species of not knowing what must come next; trusting that I will be given a way to take part in bringing God's new thing to life.

This is the gospel of the virgin mother, who shows us how Christ is born in us today. Not in preconceptions or misconceptions—indeed not in ordinary conceptions at all, but through the way of not knowing, the way of emptiness, a way prepared in humility and hope. How can this be?

A smallish part of the masters in the church of long ago offered a name for this path in faith. They called it the *via negativa*—"the path of negations," we might say; or the way of not knowing. Some people assume the phrase refers to going down a road of negative attitudes and defeats, but that's not it at all. The *via negativa* means this precious way of discovering God's new thing by noticing that God is not directly available by means of anything we grasp. Of course this includes material pleasures, but that is too obvious to tarry with. Things we grasp that do not give God include the concepts of religion—sin, eternal life, forgiveness, faith, justice, even the name God. These do not give God. They may work contrariwise, to set us up as people who know something, or think we must obey authorities who say they know something. Imagine a spiritual path opposite to the forms of ordinary religion—the *via negativa*, Mary's way, the way of emptiness. How can this be?

I myself became Christian by the way of negations, though I did not then know the path had a name or that mystics of the church had left notes. Along this way, the mind is disrobed of the heavy garments of doctrine; undefended by false security in possessing truths; trusting that by the way of knowing nothing, God will guide. Lightly tapping the floor and the walls of your life's experiences and choices, on the *via negativa*, you distinguish all that God is not. You notice where you have been leaning your last hopes—and gently, confidently, you straighten up and lean not to your own under-

standing, as Proverbs 3:5 has it. "But trust in the LORD with all thine heart; Lean not unto thine own understanding, but In all thy ways acknowledge God, who shall direct thy paths." You draw back from attachment to all that God is not. Not my nation. Not my race. Not my party. Not my skills or gifts. God is not my religion. Not what preachers say on television that I deplore. Not what the preacher says on Riverside Drive that I admire. Not the lift in the music there, nor the people who are kind there, nor those who disappoint. God is not my prayer. God is not arranging good conclusions, or bad to my conflicts, or theirs. God is not my ecstasy. Not my fear to live with this person, or without that one. God is not my sure sense of God's will. Not my vision for peace, not my justice . . .

Put your hands in the air and step away from your thoughts. God's not these. Such is the *via negativa* if you take it slow, not as a position or a power, but a humble no, in order that you be ready to give assent to your God. Through numberless relinquishments of your own way, passing into faith absolute more great and deep than the last foundation on which you stood, you receive your own experience of the presence of God. There, as Thomas Merton put it, "in the last little bit left before destruction is a kernel of gold which is the essence of you—and there is God, protecting it . . . This is something terrific." There is God keeping the flame of your light eternal, beyond all loss and gain. How can this be? You see! You are Mary. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born in you will be holy; will be called a child of God.

I must add something here. Our subject this morning is not an attitude you can simply adopt. It is way of life. It is practical beyond any saying, and therefore available only to those who practice it. This sermon will sound abstract precisely in the measure that one resists beginning a practice. Listen, then, to a teacher from 1,500 years ago: (Dionysius the Areopogite )

Do thou then in intent practice leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect and all things, that the senses or the intellect can perceive that all things which are not and all things which are, and strain upwards in not knowing, as far as may be, towards the union with God Who is above all things and knowledge. For by unceasing and absolute withdrawal from thyself and all things in purity, abandoning all and set free from all, thou shalt be borne up to the ray of divine darkness that surpasseth all being.

If perhaps someone thinks that so much seriousness in religion is not for him, hear again: real religion is practical. It is the practice that touches and heals your particular griefs and weaknesses, and reveals your own blessing. This call to you from Mary to take her path and bear Christ is God's call to leave all your misery and all your cruelty like an old, worn garment, and join the way of not knowing.

It is not the path of power. The world will never acknowledge you in it. But neither will the world ever come to peace. Only this is the way of peace. This is the birth canal by which the Prince of Peace is born. Will you go it? You must empty yourself. This wants practice and preparation, not just during this Advent, but always and ever after. Are you ready to begin? Do you know whom to ask? There are some in this church who know the path. Will you learn? Will you ask, How can this be?

When you enter the way of not knowing—it is never once-for-all, but a pattern of emptying yourself again and yet again of beliefs and fears and biases—you enter the field of freedom in action. Though at first you walk unsteadily, and leave often, on the *via negativa* you yourself become the golden kernel of God's fruit, the flame of divine love. How could it be otherwise? How could God's love be manifested in us when we are filled up with positions, oppositions, anger, and certainty? How can our action not smell like our small self then? How can one still full of opinions and needs accept the command to love her enemy? Only on the *via negativa* can you see it. And then you do see it.

On the way of not knowing, at last you take your crown. You sense your God-given authority to interpret all things according to your "naked intent to love." (Meister Eckhart) Nothing anymore simply is what is, bad or good—but all things are given into your power to love. You feel the divine gift in a word like this one from Teilhard de Chardin: *I suffer, God has touched me*. You understand what Simone Weil means saying, *I must be grateful when someone insults me and I am hurt, for he has shown me what level I am on*. You sense Dietrich Bonhoeffer's surge of great hope against religion:

The old words of churches are incapable of being saving words anymore. The old words fail and fall silent, and our Christian life consists only of prayer and trying to do the right thing. It is not for us to foretell the day, but the day will come when some are called to utter the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. There will be a new language, perhaps quite unreligious, but liberating and saving, like the language of Jesus, so that people are horrified by it, and yet conquered by its power, the language of a new truth, the language that foretells the peace of God and the coming of the Kingdom.

*How can this be?* This is Mary's way, to hold herself empty that she may become the vessel of life to the world. Deep within you, Christ has told his coming thus, that he might be born in you.