

THE PURPOSE BENEATH THE SURFACE

Has anyone watched the Pixar film *Inside Out*? It takes place inside a young person's mind and heart in the midst of moving across the country to San Francisco from familiar Minnesota. The main characters are the two primary emotions within her: Sadness and Joy. For most of the movie, Joy is lost. She is trying to be Happiness, who is someone she's not. Riley, the young girl, and therefore Joy, are stuck in the pursuit of happiness.

At the start of the film, Happiness is running around trying to keep all the other emotions in service of Riley's happiness because this seems to make her parents happy, too. Any expression of any other emotion is cut off the moment it might not make Riley or Riley's parents happy. That's the mission. Fear is afraid to be fearful. Anger is not allowed to be angry. Happiness listens somewhat to Disgust, but her biggest struggle is with Sadness. What could possibly be the point of Sadness? She is such a drag. But Sadness is not really herself either. For most of the film, Sadness is also bogged down in someone she's not – Despair.

My favorite part of the movie is when Sadness and Joy are thrust on an adventure together. They end up befriending each other and acknowledging how much Riley needs both of them. When this happens, Happiness and Despair pass away. Sadness and Joy come alive, and Sadness learns how to smile.

Where am I going with this? Nowhere. Just some hot cocoa to take the chill off. It has been cold out there.

What genre of scripture applies to the birth narrative of Jesus found in Matthew? For what purpose did the author of Matthew write it and for what purpose did the Holy Spirit permit its inclusion? For some people, a lot of red flags go up when such questions are asked. They do with me too sometimes, depending on who is asking them.

Part of the postmodern overcorrection involves shifting the agency of meaning from the author of a text to its reader. In practice, the meanings of a text are sometimes sufficiently devoid of the intent of the author, let alone of the Spirit or whatever other spirits of inspiration might be at work. Knowingly or unknowingly, some readers have given themselves permission to invent meaning, as though they

can understand the effects on the page, even the accidental ones, without discovering and discerning *with the Spirit* their source causes.

The red flags tend to come up because beginning with discovery, more often than with invention, confronts us with our need to trust that the Spirit can sufficiently bridge or safeguard the distance that exists between the author and us and can make it clear to us what the sources of the author's inspiration were. But if we refuse to trust the Spirit from the get-go, and instead just take the text and run wherever we want with it, the deception continues, at least on the surface.

Jesus knew with clarity that whatever shows up downstream is a result of what's happening somewhere upstream. And a river does not flow both ways. If I start downstream of a problem in my life, I might contain it, but it will never go away. Even if everything looks good downstream, I will never see the pollution coming until it is already in the ocean. And even after that happens, even more hands are needed at the headwaters.

Many biblical and literary practices of interpretation are incredible tools that I once applied to the outside first. Little did I know that they quickly become useless if used out of sequence. There is no point in priming a lawnmower if the gas tank is empty.

I trust I am not alone in any of this. Whether I am reading the Bible or getting to know someone, the outside-in approach is tempting. Rather than *read* a book, I have not only judged a book by its cover beforehand, but also by any number of indicators that are completely useless, especially if the Spirit wants me to be reading something else.

But Jesus was a real and inside-out guy. He put first things first better than anyone, and He put everything else where it belonged, too. That's partly why He could see right through someone, and why everything was more transparent to Him than it was to the people around Him. Sometimes starting from the outside and working my way in bogs me down or leads me into many reasonable excuses and distractions that cause me to stop far short of the core purpose or dimension when things get hard and I recognize our need for a glimpse beyond.

I am learning that the surface of a passage of scripture is more transparent and its patterns are more discernible *after* rather than before I have prayed, no matter what genre within the Bible I am faced

with. Otherwise I see it through the damage others have used it for in general or in my past.

So what is at least one purpose of a birth narrative in the Bible, and where have I seen one before? By including a birth narrative, is Matthew trying to make a purely biological and scientific statement about Jesus' origins on the human level? Is that what the author of Exodus was doing when he included the story of Moses' birth? Nowadays, we have incredibly strict labels for written texts. But some biblical authors saw no problem with including a myth, some historical references, and poetry and prophecy within a single book.

It is far from coincidence that the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament both begin with birth narratives, origin stories, creation accounts, or whichever term you prefer. There is a reality so harrowing, true, and recurrent beneath and above the story of Adam and Eve. Speaking to such a deep universal experience, most of which is worked out personally in every person and couple's life, the story could not have been told in any other way that we would still read today. However accustomed someone's mind is to beginning with the particular rather than the abstract, we need to shift gears when we come across such stories and trust the Spirit to lead us from the abstract into the particular.

We read Paul witness to the two major levels of reality. *“On the human level [Jesus] was a descendant of David, but on the level of the spirit – the Holy Spirit – he was proclaimed Son of God by an act of power that raised him from the dead”* (Romans 1:3)

This speaks to the power and substance of the level of the Spirit when someone fully yields to grace on the human level. Our obedience to God on the human level is like a portal through which only the activity of the Spirit can manifest in and influence what happens on the human level. The more we yield to grace, the stronger the portal becomes. Similarly, our disobedience is also like a portal. The more we rely on ourselves on an individual and collective basis, the more we open this world to the activity of darkness.

Because Jesus completely yielded to God on the human level and followed God all the way through the moment of His death on the cross, this portal was never closed, never can be closed, and had never been more open to the power of God who raised Him from the dead.

Jesus must have left no part of His physicality on the human level closed to His new physicality on the level of the Holy Spirit, which would have required Him to leave every part of His physicality on the human level completely sealed to the enemy from the inside. His crucifixion reveals how furiously the enemy attempted to break that seal and barge in. His resurrection reveals not only the utter failure of such an attempt, but also the permanence of the passage-way Jesus offers for the reconciliation of all who are willing to enter through the cross.

Where did Jesus learn how to let God into this world with such love and abandon? Probably from His parents.

One of the purposes of Matthew's birth narrative might have been to show that Mary – like the Levite woman who placed Moses among the reeds to be raised by slave owners – had a unique and strong relationship with God apart from her husband, who also had a unique and strong relationship with God prior to Jesus' birth.

What is better than a Trojan Horse made of wood? A Hebrew liberator in the form of a slave woman's baby made of flesh and blood. What could possibly be greater than Moses? The Son and Liberator of God in the form of a marginalized woman's baby. Why change the form if it will make your enemies think they are dealing with someone like Moses again? And how do you tell such a story in language that shows and inspires rather than explains the awe and shock of the people who lived to encounter Moses and Jesus on the human level?

Just as there were two creation accounts in the book of Genesis, there are two birth narratives of Jesus at the beginning of Matthew. On the level of the Spirit, the first creation account in Genesis tries to inspire us to hear what happened when the universe was made. It does not tell us *how* it happened. Science has only begun to help us discover how it happened on the human level. Similarly, the second account in Genesis is on the level of the Spirit and is partly about what happens when sin comes into this world and gets perpetuated, but it is not about the beginning of humanity. It is about the beginning of *your* humanity and its distortion. It did not happen thousands of years ago on the human level. It probably happened just yesterday to someone.

In the same way, the stories of Moses' birth and Jesus' birth are partly about how the power of the Holy Spirit can more than break and heal the power of sin on both levels whenever and wherever there are bold and courageous parents who are willing to go through the process ahead of time so that nothing that God desires for their children is kicked down the road.

Just imagine a child who inherited every single promise and blessing God gave to David all the way upstream to Abraham and all the way downstream to Joseph, yet who also was more than free at birth from all the iniquity present in David's line – all the way back to Abram pretending his wife was his sister. Imagine what would happen if any of us became more than free today from the iniquity present on our mother's and father's sides. Such things are possible with God.

I am not alone in believing that the long genealogy situated before the story of Jesus' conception suggests that Mary and Joseph fully yielded to the Spirit's purification of their family lines prior to Jesus beginning His life on earth. Through prayer and trust in God, Mary and Joseph must have surrendered to God's desire to heal every negative generational pattern in either of their lines that would have been visited upon Jesus had they not confronted and taken accountability for it first. And not only that, but Mary must have also fully united Jesus' birth on the human level with a parallel and intersecting birth in the Spirit so that the two took place in full communion.

Most of us were not born as free as Jesus was on the human level, but that does not mean we cannot be or that it is too late. Every time we accept Jesus' call to follow Him, we grow to love the One who can make us, our children, our children-to-be – or anyone the Spirit wants us to yield into His care – more than free on the human level. What the Spirit does on His level is up to Him.

Certainly such freedom has implications in every dimension of our lives, especially the physical. But we must not listen to any who whisper in our ear that it is too late. Because it is not too late. All is not lost. God can more than restore the years. Will we let Him? You have no idea how much I hope someone at least preached this sermon to my parents before I was born.