

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Making an Immaculate Reception”**

John 1:1 – 18

January 4, 2015

Well, I’m sure that most of you have heard the expression, “The Immaculate Conception,” right? The Immaculate Conception? Those of you with a Roman Catholic background probably know what that expression means, but I’ve found over the years that many of us Protestant-types have a misunderstanding about it. A lot of non-Catholic people think that The Immaculate Conception refers to the conception of *Jesus*... the fact that He was virginally, or miraculously, conceived. But if you think that... you’re *wrong*!

Because The Immaculate Conception refers *not* to the conception of Jesus... it refers to the conception of Jesus’ *mother*, Mary! And, specifically, it means that Mary herself was conceived *immaculately*, or without the taint of Original Sin, so that she could be a perfect, sinless, and proper vessel to bear Jesus, the Son of Almighty God.

This is an important belief for our Catholic friends; but we Presbyterians don’t accept it, because it’s not a doctrine established on the basis of biblical teaching (in other words, it’s not something that we learn from the Bible itself); but rather it’s a doctrine that was established by the teaching authority of the church, based in part on the church’s very high view of Mary. Protestants say that it wasn’t necessary that Mary be conceived without sin; Catholics say that it *was* necessary. It’s not a major controversy, but, in either case, that’s the basic gist of The Immaculate *Conception*.

Okay, now, how many of you have heard of “The Immaculate *Reception*?” The Immaculate Reception? Many of you have probably never heard of it; but if you’re a football fan, you know that The Immaculate Reception is the name famously given to a catch made by Pittsburgh Steelers’ running back, Franco Harris, during a 1972 playoff game against the Oakland Raiders. In that game, the Steelers were trailing the Raiders by the score of 7-6, with just 20 seconds left on the clock. The Steelers had the ball on their own 40 yard line, fourth down and ten yards to go, and with no time-outs left. For you non-football fans out there, that pretty much meant that Pittsburgh’s goose was cooked.

Anyway, Steeler quarterback Terry Bradshaw dropped back, scrambled around, and threw a desperation pass to receiver Frenchy Fuqua. Just as the ball reached Fuqua, he was leveled by Raider defensive back, Jack Tatum. Fuqua sprawled to the turf, and the ball went flying... where it was snatched out of the air, inches from the ground, by Harris; who then galloped into the end zone for the game-winning touchdown.

It was Steeler radio broadcaster, Myron Cope, who first coined the phrase, “The Immaculate Reception,” and today many football fans consider it to be the greatest play in NFL history. If you’ve never seen it, check it out on YouTube sometime... even after all these years, it’s still incredible.

Now, you may be wondering what The Immaculate Conception, has to do with The Immaculate Reception... and what either one of them has to do with our life of Christian faith, as we make our way into 2015. But if you stop and think about it, these two “immaculate” references

are a great reminder of just what we need to do... to make the new year, a **great** year of spiritual growth, and strengthening faith.

Take the Immaculate Conception. Forget about the Virgin Mary for a moment, and consider your own life... your own quest to be a faithful disciple of Jesus. Well, if we're trying to grow in our faith, and have a more meaningful life with our Lord, one of the most important things that we can do is to **prepare** ourselves for that to happen.

One of the most important things that we can do is to make ourselves **ready** for God to come to us, and make His home with us, and in us. To make of ourselves a vessel, a dwelling, that is fit for, and worthy of, the God who has made us and who loves us. Not that we have to be sinless, or perfect, or "immaculate" in the way that Mary may have been; but that, like Mary, we have to be **ready** for Jesus to be part of us. We have to be **prepared** for Jesus to fill us, heart, mind, and body; and to make of us the people that He wants and needs us to be.

When we think of the phrase "Immaculate Conception" in **this** way, as referring to our ongoing need to be prepared for whatever it may be that Jesus wants to accomplish in us... we see that it makes a lot of sense, and that it's the perfect kind of attitude or mindset with which to begin another new year of Christian discipleship.

Well, then, what about the "Immaculate Reception?" What on earth could that possibly have to do with the life of faith that we want to live in 2015 and beyond? Well, again, we need to forget about football and the Pittsburgh Steelers... and think once again about our own life, our own faith, our own quest to grow as Christian disciples. And, in order to really grow in faith in the year ahead, what we need to receive in our hearts and lives isn't a football... but the Lord Jesus Himself!

Not that we've never received Him before; not that we've never been Christian believers before; but just that we want to receive Jesus anew, with greater confidence and conviction, with a renewed sense of dedication and commitment. We want to open our hearts and receive the good that God would do us; we want to receive the hope and the peace that only Jesus can give us; we want to receive a booster shot of the "blessed assurance" that, with Almighty God in our lives, there's no problem on earth that will ever be able to completely undo us.

This, I think, was one of the points that John was making when, in our gospel lesson this morning, he proclaimed that:

"The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world."

John was telling his earliest readers, and he's telling us, that the Son of God was coming into the world, into **our** world; he was saying that the Savior had arrived, the One who would bring the light, the hope, the grace, and the power of God Himself into every corner of our sometimes joyous, sometimes heartbroken, lives. And, according to John, all we have to do in order to be blessed by this tremendous gift, is to open up our hearts and minds and receive it! Welcome it! Accept it! As John said:

"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

According to John, Jesus has come, into the dirty, gritty, desperate, challenging world in which we live. And He has come... for us! He has come... to be with us! He has come... to give our lives meaning, and purpose, and joy! And all we have to do, is to make a little “Immaculate Reception” of our own... and say, “Welcome home, Jesus! Welcome to my heart! Welcome to my world! Welcome to my daily life... in all it’s glory, and in all it’s difficulty! Welcome! Welcome!”

As we make our way into our 375th anniversary year as a church family, I hope that we’ll all do our best to make our own “Immaculate Reception...” and invite Jesus to be a part of our life, and to be a resident of our heart, with all the courage and conviction that we can muster.

I hope that we’ll all engage in our own little Protestant version of the “Immaculate Conception...” and take with joyous seriousness the challenge to prepare ourselves for Jesus to be with us, and in us, and part of us, amid all the celebrations and challenges of our life. I hope that we’ll make this year the greatest year we’ve ever had: as a church, as a congregation, as disciples of Jesus Christ! May that be our quest, and may that be our goal... this year, next year, and every year!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!