

## **The Real Madonna!**

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on December 19, 1993, the fourth Sunday of Advent. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

When you hear the name, Madonna, who do you think of first? Most of us think of a famous singer, actress, and exhibitionist who has made millions of dollars as an entertainer. A few of us may not realize it, but there's another Madonna. It's just possible that some of us don't realize that the real Madonna - the one after whom Madonna is named- is the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus. "Madonna" means "my lady" in Italian. I don't know exactly why the Virgin Mary came to be known as "my lady" or Madonna but my guess is that "My Lady" is a title of nobility corresponding to the title "Lord" as in "lords and ladies".

Luke says that Mary was "engaged" to Joseph. That means she was about 14 years old. Many Palestinian girls even today are engaged when they're in their early teens. Engagement or betrothal, in Bible times, was a lot more serious than modern engagements. Engagement was almost as binding as marriage. Divorce proceedings were necessary to end an engagement. Engaged men and women were referred to as husband and wife but they lived separately in their parents homes and the rabbis disapproved of the co-habitation of engaged couples. The husband often never saw the face of his wife until the night of the wedding when her veil was removed. Any violation of the engagement relationship was considered adultery.

Luke also tells us that Mary was a Virgin. Let's stop here for a moment. People in the days of Jesus weren't stupid. They knew that Virgins don't get pregnant. Mary knew this. When Gabriel told Mary she would conceive and bear the Son of God, she said to Gabriel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Everybody knew that virgin births are biologically impossible.

From time to time we hear about some minister who denies the Virgin Birth. Karl Barth,

the greatest 20th century theologian - a man whose preaching and writing has influenced the Presbyterian Church and myself more than any other 20th century theologian- severely took to task theologians who deny the Virgin Birth. He accused them of being narrow minded and hopelessly compromised by rationalism. Rationalism is a fancy word meaning that our reason alone can discover what's true and possible. Our reason tells us that virgins can't get pregnant. It's a biological impossibility. It's a violation of the natural laws of reproduction.

But Karl Barth said, what is possible can't be limited by our narrow philosophy and understanding of nature. What is possible must be based on what actually happens. For example, <sup>200 years ago</sup> we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, not because it's a natural possibility that dead people can sometimes come back to life. Nobody believes that resurrections are a natural possibility. We believe in the Resurrection because Jesus appeared unexpectedly alive to confused and doubting disciples. Likewise, Christians believe in the Virgin Birth, not because it's a natural possibility for some virgins to conceive and give birth, but because the Resurrection of Jesus Christ demonstrates that he is God in the flesh and our Lord and Savior. The Virgin Birth of Christ doesn't prove that Jesus is the Son of God. It's the other way around. Because Jesus Christ is unique, God's one and only son, and the Risen Lord we don't find it difficult to consider that his conception was unique. Our belief in the Virgin Birth is based on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The story of Mary and the Virgin Birth has application today. It particularly has application to the way men treat women. God's gift of Jesus excludes any proud boasting on the part of man as male. God chose to by-pass man ~~as male~~ altogether, and chose a lowly woman through whom to give his gift of a Savior. In the days of Jesus a woman was a "non-person". Men walked down the street and ignored passing women. Women could not testify

in court. Their word was not trusted. Women were not taught the Law of God. Rabbis, in fact, said, "It's better to teach a woman to be immoral than to teach her the Law of God." Jewish men prayed everyday, "I thank thee, Lord, that I was not born a gentile, a slave or a woman." Men also believed that women contributed nothing in the birth of children. Women were only empty, passive vessels, or incubators, where a man's children grew until old enough to be born.

Throughout history, men, because they are usually physically stronger than women have unduly boasted in their masculinity and often used their physical strength to put down women. The story of the Virgin Mary should make us "proud" men rethink the way we treat women. God chose Mary, a lowly, supposedly weak, foolish, passive, uneducated woman to be the one through ~~him~~<sup>whom</sup> he gave us his great Christmas miracle, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible itself teaches this. The apostle Paul doesn't speak directly of the Virgin Birth but he does say this: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world... so that no one might boast in the presence of God." Paul very well may have been referring to the Virgin Mary who, in the eyes of the world, was foolish, weak and despised.

John, the Gospel writer, doesn't directly mention the Virgin Birth either but he does say this: "To all who received Jesus, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh *or of the will of man* but of God." This teaches us that our own salvation and our relationship to God is not a result of anything that we do. No matter how strong-willed and powerful we are we can't save ourselves and we can't save anybody else. Our human fathers, even when they're good and devout Christians, can't save us; can't give us spiritual life; can't produce the new birth. Only God can give us a

new birth from above and make us God's children. And this miraculous new birth, which we all need in order to enter the Kingdom of heaven, usually takes place in the womb of mother church where we hear the Word of God preached and taught.

So I've told you something about the real Madonna. Many of us may have known more about the Hollywood Madonna than we did about the real Madonna. We know how controversial, daring and shocking the modern Madonna is. But the real Madonna did something far more courageous, daring and shocking. The real Madonna dared to believe the Word of God. She believed so much that she was willing to face slander. She knew what it was like to be scorned by the polite society of Nazareth. Imagine the cat calls and the hoots she got as she went to the well to draw water for her family. Imagine her fears that Joseph would disappear and she'd be left a single parent in a society that had little room for illegitimacy and out-of-wedlock parenthood. Mary was a strong, daring, courageous young woman. She wasn't a weak and passive woman. In response to the Word of God, she said, "Let it be!" I don't believe she spoke with an air of resignation. It was a compliant and passive, "Let it be!" But a strong, daring, courageous, "Let it be!"

Respond in faith to the Word of God when it comes to you! God asks us to do daring things for him every day. Daring things - like delivering a food basket. Daring things like speaking up for what you know is right even when you won't win friends by doing so. Daring things - like bearing witness to your faith in Jesus Christ to a friend or neighbor. Pray for the courage to respond with Mary! Pray for the courage to be willing, as Mary was, to let the Lord Jesus Christ be born in us - enter into our lives and begin to change our lives and the lives of those around us. "Let it be! Let it be! Lord, let it be!"

Let us pray: God of grace, you chose the Virgin Mary, full of grace, to be the mother of our Lord and Savior. Now fill us with your grace, that with her, we may rejoice in your salvation, and in all things, embrace your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.