

If our Order of Worship seems a bit different this morning, that is because it is, both because of the nature of my remarks and because of the wonderful passage from Luke known as “The Magnificat,” a song that Mary sings upon learning that she will bear Jesus. We have that passage in our Lectionary today — for those to whom I have not explained, most churches follow the *Revised Common Lectionary*, a three year schedule of Bible readings anchored in rotating fashion by Matthew, Mark, or Luke, and we have just begun the year in which Matthew is used. We have “The Magnificat” in today’s Lectionary as an alternative to a psalm, since this is not otherwise the year we read the Gospel of Luke, and I thought it might be an interesting introduction to the Ritual of Confession, which because of that passage and my topic, I have moved to after this sermon.

Matthew and Luke are the only of the four versions of the Gospel that have anything to say about the birth of Jesus (all four gospels have John the Baptist featured prominently early on), even though the Matthew and Luke stories are more complementary than similar. Possibly based on a miss-translation of a word, *ahlmah*, meaning “young woman” in the Hebrew of the Old Testament book of Isaiah into the Greek word for “virgin,” *παρθένο*, in the Greek of the *Septuagint*, which was the form of the Old Testament presumably known to the writers of the gospels, in Matthew and in Luke Mary is a *virgin* at the time of Jesus’ birth, a physical condition mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament.

The Matthew account of Jesus’ birth moves swiftly from virgin Mary’s being pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and Matthew’s accepting this because in a dream he is addressed by an angel, to the event we celebrate as Epiphany, by Church tradition (there is no mention of time in the Bible) twelve days after Jesus’ birth, when the Magi come to the house — not a stable — where Mary and Joseph and their baby are. The writer of Luke gives an extended and lovely story of Mary’s being pregnant at the same time as, but a bit behind, her cousin, Elizabeth, the mother of John then Baptist, and just as the writer of Luke gave to John’s father, Zechariah, a song we used two weeks or so back, so the same writer gives to this young virgin the song we shall read together shortly,

“And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.”

So at least as Luke and Matthew tell it, it took a spotless virgin first to bring the “Good News” into the world.

“Spotless”? A “virgin”? What hope is there for any of us to be worthy to take this Good News into the world if this is the requirement to be a messenger?

Though most of you know that I am a real sports nut, since moving from Chicago to Tucson, I have mostly quit following pro-basketball. Still, on those rare occasions when I catch a game on television, I especially enjoy the telecasts where Charles Barkley is one of the half-time commentators. It’s mainly because he has such an out-sized personality and can be very funny, and though sometimes negative, comes across as

likable. From looking at his current physique that I'll show in just a moment, you would never know that he once was a basketball player, but the reason I am referring to Charles has to do with a statement he made, whether specifically for a shoe commercial or, more than likely, in all seriousness and that was then incorporated into the commercial:

“I am not a role model. . . Just because I dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids.”

I want to go back to that “I'm not a role model” in a second, but I would be remiss in showing you one area in which he certainly is not a role model; Charles is credited with one of the worst swings in golf!

“I'm not a role model.” Charles Barkley might not be a “role model” in the traditional sense, yet in a real sense he is quite an effective *messenger* for professional basketball, which is why we see him so prominently. Not a traditional role model, not perfect, and yet, anything but useless as a messenger.

To the extent that one thinks perfection is necessary to be a “role model,” none of us should be, but for the most part, putting our roles in influencing kids aside, we do not need to be “traditional role models” to model what it means to be Christian, to be followers of Christ, to carry the message of, to be followers of Christ, but that is not to say that what we do in that role or in those roles does not matter.

In our Gospel reading, John the Baptist (we read about John last week) has been imprisoned — next year we shall learn how that came about, but hint: “dance of the seven veils,” — and he, John, has sent some followers to ask whether Jesus is the Messiah whom John has been proclaiming. Jesus does not say, “Of course I am” or “Haven't you heard what I have been teaching?” but rather talks about what he has been *doing*! The actions of Jesus testify to who he is! He even speaks about John in a way that suggests that no one simply looking at John would realize his role, yet he had been filling it in what he, John, had done.

Well, where are *we* in this picture? Are there any roles for us? We are closer, at least I am, to Charles Barkley (I hope not in my golf swing, however) than to a spotless virgin, yet I can *do*; I cannot do miracles, nor can you, yet I know — and shared an example last week — that I can carry Jesus Christ to another, at least on your behalf — no; not on *your* behalf, on *His* behalf sponsored by you. “Yes,” what I say matters, I can not say, “Jesus loves you you miserable scum” *a la* a Monty Python character, but rather I can show that I find all other persons to be as worthy of Jesus' love as I, I *can* carry the message, *you can* carry the message, *we all can* carry the message, and, in a tangible sense, be not only the messengers but the message of God's love shown in Jesus, because despite our faults, we believe and know that Jesus loves us!

Are we *hypocrites* when we attempt to carry the message because of the fact that we are sinners, that I at times am that “miserable scum”? We would be hypocrites only if we

denied that we are sinners. When we sing “Amazing Grace,” as I have said before, if we do not sing with enthusiasm “that saved a wretch like me” we just do not get the song — nor do we get Jesus’ message to us. There has been only one human being without sin (sorry to my Roman Catholic friends for whom the doctrine of “Immaculate Conception” holds that Mary was without sin); God relies upon sinners like you and me.

Do we doubt that God relies upon sinners like you and me? Last Sunday, I showed a slide of how in Matthew’s version of the Gospel, before we encounter Mary, we read a genealogy of Jesus through Joseph to establish — and I mentioned the logical inconsistency of its so establishing since Joseph’s genes could not be in Jesus if Mary was a virgin — to establish that Jesus was of the lineage of King David. Within the forty-one generations through Joseph of named males, we encounter four and only four women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and “the wife of Uriah,” who happens to have been Bathsheba of Susan Hayward, I mean, of “David and Bathsheba,” fame. I like to emphasize, as I did in the Advent Bible study in Coolidge last Tuesday, first, that God clearly used then and uses now women; second that God used non-Jewish women; and, finally, that while we later encounter a spotless virgin fifth woman in Jesus’ genealogy, there is something that, rightly or wrongly, and I need to emphasize that “rightly or wrongly” aspect, would have been seen as unseemly about each of these four women. To cut to the core, as an example, Rahab was a prostitute. These four would not be traditional role models. *But as the genealogy shows, one does not have to be perfect to be used by God, to play a role in God’s plan.*

God does not rely upon perfection in humans to deliver the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ to imperfect humans! You and I are indeed role models if we can, as imperfect human beings, show others that God can love them because we experience that God loves imperfect us, and that we are laboring however imperfectly to show that love to others!

To paraphrase from a funny movie some years back, “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, “It’s what we, we imperfect Christians, do.” *It’s what we do* — to carry within our frames as imperfect messengers the message that Jesus Christ is Lord, that God loves us all.

Be a role model to this extent; however imperfectly, show those around you how to carry that message.

In his name. Amen.