

The Journey to Bethlehem sermon series

“Mary of Nazareth”

[Luke 1:26-38](#)

Today, we are starting a new sermon series called, The Journey to Bethlehem. Based on Adam Hamilton’s book, *The Journey*, we will seek to rediscover the familiar Gospel stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. We will gain insight into our own Advent journey, as we retrace the steps of Joseph and Mary in Nazareth, Mary’s hometown, in Bethlehem, Joseph’s hometown as well as Jesus’ birthplace, and in Ein Karem, the traditional site for the home of Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin.

What is the name of the town that comes to your mind when you think of the birth of Jesus? I am sure it’s Bethlehem! Though I have never been there, it is a beautiful small town in my imagination, probably because of this Christmas carol: “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie; above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by....” However, as we heard from today’s scripture reading, the Christmas story as recorded in the Gospel of Luke begins in another town, called Nazareth, where Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel.

Nazareth was one of the towns in the region of Galilee in the first century. The town was so small and insignificant that it was not mentioned anywhere else besides in the Bible until much later. The 1st century Jewish historian Josephus, who recorded Jewish history, mentioned 45 towns of Galilee, but Nazareth did not make his list. A total of 63 towns and villages of Galilee were mentioned in the Hebrew Talmud, but Nazareth was not one of them.

In its first chapter, the Gospel of John records a conversation that tells us the social status of Nazareth in the first century. Phillip, one of the first three disciples of Jesus says to his friend, Nathanael, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote - Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” To which Nathanael replies, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”

About an hour’s walk from Nazareth, there was a large, wealthy town, called Sepphoris. Though this town is not mentioned in the Bible, it was a famous city with shops and markets, well known for its culture and entertainment. The Jewish historian Josephus called the town, “the ornament of all Galilee,” and King Herod chose it as the capital of his government. Excavations have revealed the scale of the town’s prosperity and the affluent lifestyle of its residents. In contrast, the town of Nazareth did not have much to offer. Its residents were rather poor people, and some of them even lived in caves because they could not afford to build a house.

Yet, it was not Sepphoris but Nazareth that God chose to bring the Messiah into the world. God sent the angel Gabriel not to the big and rich city of Sepphoris, but to the small and poor town of Nazareth. God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary, one of the residents of the poor town. God chose this young woman, who was likely uneducated, and who was probably from a working-class family to be the mother of the

Messiah. What does this tell us about God and God's ways? We find a perfect answer to this question in the words the apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth. He said,

“God chose what the world considers foolish to shame the wise. God chose what the world considers weak to shame the strong. And God chose what the world considers low-class and low-life—what is considered to be nothing—to reduce what is considered to be something to nothing.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-28)

There is something special about the name of this small town. Most scholars believe that Nazareth may be derived from the Hebrew word, *netzer*, which means a “branch” or a “shoot.” When a tree is cut down, you will notice soon a new shoot beginning to grow from the stump. What happens if you cut it off? Another shoot comes out! That's a *netzer*, and it alludes to the prophetic words in the book of Isaiah, chapter 11.

Throughout their history, Israelites struggled with tribal conflicts and political unrest. Eventually, their kingdom was divided into two nations, then, both were destroyed by foreign powers - first, the Northern half of the country, by the Assyrian Empire, and then, the Southern half, by the Babylonian Empire. The prophets often spoke about the destruction of their nation and its restoration, using the metaphor of a shoot. Isaiah 11:1-4 says,

A shoot [*netzer*] shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
And a branch [*netzer*] shall grow out of his roots.
The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him...
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
But with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
And decide with equity for the meek of the earth...

For the people of Israel, the word, *netzer* which means a shoot or a branch was a promise of their future. It was a word loaded with hope. Perhaps, when the early settlers of Nazareth chose that word as the name of their town, they were expressing their hope for their future. In the name of their town, they were placing their prayer that, one day, God will send them a new king, a messiah who would deliver them from the hands of their enemies and restore the glory of their nation. Yet, no one probably even imagined that the branch their prophets had foretold, the branch they adopted as the name of their town would be a child growing up in their midst...

Now, let's turn our attention to Mary, the woman God chose to bring Christ into the world. We do not know anything about her family except the fact that she lived in the small town of Nazareth. The Gospel of Matthew clearly points out the family background of Mary's husband, Joseph. He was a descendent of King David. Yet, all four gospels are silent about her genealogy.

How old was she? Considering the ancient custom of her world, highly likely, Mary was between 12 and 14 years old. For the sake of convenience, we can just say she was 13 years old. Though it is hard to

imagine from our modern perspective, she was at that age young girls would begin to marry and have children. Like the rest of the girls her age, Mary was engaged, too. According to custom, she would have to wait for a year in engagement until she and her fiancé had a wedding ceremony. And, once she was married, she would have been expected to deliver a child every year.

One day during her engagement period to Joseph, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. The angel probably did not look like a supernatural being with big wings on the back, but more like an ordinary human being because the scripture does not say she was terrified but just perplexed. And, she became perplexed not because the appearance of the angel but because of the greeting the angel said to her. Actually, the word, angel is a Greek word which simply means “messenger.”

Where do you think this encounter happened? The Greek Orthodox Church believes the angel appeared to Mary when she was at a spring. But, the Roman Catholic Church believes she was at her home when it happened. Regardless where or when the angel appeared, the message he delivered was not such good news but rather terrifying to her: she had found favor with God, so she would have a son, who will become the King, the Messiah.

What an awesome blessing for the child she was to carry! But, there was a problem. She was not married yet. So, she asks, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angels says, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

Can you imagine what went through Mary’s mind, as she was desperately trying to understand what the angel was telling her? I am sure there were many questions she wanted to ask: How can I break this news to my fiancé and my family? How would they react to my pregnancy? What would my friends and neighbors say? What would the rabbi say? What does this mean to bear the son of God, anyway?

Yet, with all the unanswered questions racing through her mind and trembling with fear, Mary’s answer to Gabriel was simple yet profound, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Mary said “Yes,” despite the fear that her fiancé might call off their wedding, and despite the fear of being disowned by her family. Mary said “Yes,” despite the fact that she likely would be subjected to public shame and despite the prospect losing everything - her dreams and hopes, and even her own life.

In Mary of Nazareth, we see an example of how we are to live as Christian believers. Answering God’s call can mean giving up our own dreams and setting aside our own plans. It can mean taking risks. It can mean leaving the familiar places and people in our lives behind. Twice the angel of the Lord tells Mary she has found favor with God. Yet, for Mary, God’s favor meant not an easy and smooth ride but a life full of challenges and risks.

This season of Advent, as we are getting ready to celebrate the birth of Christ, we are invited to examine our hearts and to offer ourselves in humble obedience to God’s mission as Mary did. Because Christmas is not just another holiday of lots of festivity. Christmas is not just about giving and getting many gifts. Christmas is also about making space for God's will to be done in our lives. It is also about our

willingness to say with Mary, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

As we begin this Advent season, which marks the beginning of the church calendar year, may we join Mary in giving our “Yes” to God's mission, to God's unique call on our lives. Even if it means letting go of what we desire and embracing what seems like the impossible. For nothing is impossible with God.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.