

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

December 22, 2024, The 4th Sunday of Advent

Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:26-38

ADVENT WITH THE WAITING ONES—MARY THE MOTHER OF JESUS

This Advent we have talked about waiting with Zechariah and Elizabeth, and with Joseph the earthly father of Jesus. This morning, we are going to spend some time with Mary the mother of Jesus, who in all of human history waited for the unexpected more than anyone I can imagine. After being visited by the Angel Gabriel, she waited 9 months for the birth of her son, as all women giving birth do. But she waited for the Messiah whom she had been told was to be named Jesus and he would be the Son of the Most High God.

This is a kind of waiting that is hard to even imagine!

Mary was probably somewhere between 13 and 15 years old when the Angel Gabriel visited her. She lived in the small village of Nazareth, with a population of about 100-400 people.

She would have known everyone and everyone would have known her.

She'd probably spent all her life there, the adults of her village had watched her grow up to be the young woman they saw helping her mother, going to the well, caring for the garden, caring for the younger children.

Nazareth was a Jewish village. Mary would have been raised with faith in God being as basic to her as the air she breathed.

She would have joined her family and neighbors, worshiping God in the synagogue.

She would have heard the words of the scriptures, the laws of Moses, the history of her people, the poetry and the proverbs. She would have known the words of the Psalms by heart, they were the hymnbook of her people. She would have known the longing of her people, for the promised Messiah.

The village of Nazareth was so small that from a distance it couldn't even be seen. It was in the hills above the Sea of Galilee, in a "hollow pear-shaped basin" up about 1500 feet above sea level. Mary had grown up about 19 miles away from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. (at Tiberius)

Nazareth was such a small place that it wasn't even mentioned in Hebrew writings of the time, when they listed the 63 villages of the region of Galilee (the Talmud).

You may remember that when Philip, one of Jesus' first disciples, told Nathanael that they had found the Messiah and he was Joseph's son from Nazareth, Nathanael asked: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:45-46)

Nazareth was the kind of town the Northern Irish would say was at "the back of beyond." And we might say it's out in the sticks, or maybe, "don't blink, or you'll miss it."

There is a hill about 500 feet above the town, and I like to imagine Mary as a child, and later Jesus, climbing up this hill to see the world open up before them. From that vantage point they could see the beauty of the Promised Land God had given to their people over 1000 years before.

"To the north they could see...the mountains of Lebanon with snow-covered Mt. Hermon towering above them all.

To the west they could see the coast of the town of Tyre and the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

To the south they could see the whole plain of Esdraelon which was the scene of many of the most memorable battles of Israel,
and to the east, the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River Valley.”

The world of their ancestors of faith spread out before them in all four directions.

While Mary grew up in a very small village, just above her village she could climb the hill and look out at the world. Mary was a peasant woman, a child by our standards, engaged to be married to a carpenter in her village, Joseph. He was older than she was, maybe somewhere in his 20's, or maybe older, which was common. Her parents had arranged the marriage.

She lived with her parents, in a simple home probably made of bricks and mud with a flat roof. The family would gather on the roof to catch the cool evening breezes on hot summer nights.

For background info see: <http://www.bible-history.com/geography/ancient-israel/nazareth.html> and <http://www.haaretz.com/news/in-pictures-israel-uncovers-first-jesus-era-house-in-nazareth-1.1682>

This week I've been thinking a lot about Mary. What was she doing when the angel Gabriel came from God? Was she hanging out the laundry, washing the dishes, daydreaming, or praying?

And how do we know her story?

Did her mother tell the other village women, as they gathered at the communal well, and the word spread?

Did the neighbors hear the cries of Mary's parents as she tried to explain to them what the angel Gabriel had said?

Did she tell her stories to others as she got older?

Did she tell the story to Jesus as he was growing up?

How did Luke the gospel writer know this story, did Mary or Jesus tell him?

Why did God make sure that you and I know this story today?

I find I have so many questions about Mary's story. Once Gabriel had gone back into heaven, did Mary run to find her mother, her father, and Joseph?

Or was she too scared to tell anyone at first?

Was she afraid they wouldn't believe her?

Did she tell them about her relative Elizabeth's pregnancy first, and then talk about herself?

Did she whisper the news to her mother and let her tell her father?

Was Mary excited and honored to be carrying the Son of God,
or silent like Zechariah,
or laughing with joy, as the news sunk in?

Did she worry immediately about what the neighbors would say,
what Joseph would say,
what her parents would say?

Or was she so sure that Gabriel's message was true, that she wasn't really unsure or afraid at all?

We'll never know all that Mary went through after Gabriel went back to heaven.

But it's overwhelming to think of what she went through when her world was changed so completely.

This week I've also been thinking about Mary meeting the Angel Gabriel. Given the culture of her day, it is amazing that we even have Mary's story in writing. But how could the early Christians not record this amazing story of a faithful young girl being visited by an angel messenger from God?

What I find so interesting about Mary is her courage. A courage she used again at the end of her son's life.

Gabriel comes to her and says: *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."* And then we hear one of the biggest understatements in scripture: *"But Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."*

And when she asks what sort of the greeting this angel brings to her, the gift from Gabriel, heaven's messenger, is to offer her peace. Gabriel said, *"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High."*

While most of us would be silenced by this encounter and this astonishing news, Mary has the courage to question Gabriel. She asks, *"How can this be, since I am a virgin, I haven't slept with a man?"*

Mary has the faith and the courage to question the plans of heaven. Her life is going to be changed forever and she wants to understand the particulars.

Then Gabriel answered her, *"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*

For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then courageous, faithful, strong, young Mary said, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* Then the angel departed from her.

What I love about Mary's story is her heart, her questioning, and her ability to say yes to a life-changing plan.

Gabriel tells her "nothing is impossible with God," and she believes him.

She believes that she will become the mother of God's son.

She believes that she is going to be the mother of the Messiah that all of Israel has waited for, for generations.

Mary believes.

But what is it in Mary that lets her say yes to God?

What is it about her faith, that lets her say yes to a life-altering plan?

How can she talk with an angel messenger from God, and ask the difficult questions?

What is it in Mary's heart that allows her to make room for the Son of God in her life?

And what is the Advent message for us from this courageous, faith-filled girl?

What does she say to us this morning from her small house in Nazareth, with her view of the world up the hill, after greeting a heavenly messenger?

What is she inviting us to make room for in our lives, in the last days of the season of Advent?

One of the invitations of Advent is to slow down, to make time to let the love and Spirit of Christ be born into our lives in new ways.

Can we hear God's words that are also for us in seasons of new calls from God, and in seasons that change our lives, or our family's life, or as we are experiencing now, our church's life? Can we take the words to Mary as words for us this morning: "Do not be afraid, you have found favor with God?"

Then, can we make room in ourselves, to listen for what God wants to give birth to, in each of our hearts and lives, and in our life as a church family?

Can we let ourselves take the risk of trusting that our God can use us and our lives in this Advent Season and beyond?

You, beloved children of God, have also found favor with God. Here at the end of 2024, and on the cusp of 2025, let us trust in the promise from Gabriel to a young girl and God's promise to us in our seasons of change and new life:

"Nothing is impossible with God!"

May these words give us the courage to let God's unexpected plans be birthed in us!

The God of the Season of Advent asks each of us: "How will you say yes?"

The God of Mary and Joseph and the Angel Gabriel,
the God of our lives asks us today:

"Beloved Children, how will you say yes to new life from God,
that is waiting to be born in you?"