

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

December 1, 2019, The 1st Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-6, Luke 1:26-38

THE JOURNEY--WALKING THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM-- WITH MARY OF NAZARETH

This morning I am inviting you to join me on a journey for the next four Sundays. Now you may have already been sitting here thinking about all the things you need to get done in the next 3-1/2 weeks, to be ready for Christmas, and the thought of one more thing, is one more thing too many.

But it will come as no surprise to you that I actually think there are things more important than Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, Cyber Monday and even Giving Tuesday. As Christians we follow a different calendar. It is a calendar shaped by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, whom we follow.

So, the journey I'm inviting you on begins today, which as I said to you at the beginning of worship, is New Year's Day for us, as Christians. For over 1700 years Christians have celebrated the Season of Advent, the four-week season of preparing our hearts and lives to celebrate Jesus coming to the world as a baby born in a manger, and also a season of looking forward to the day of Jesus' return.

But this season is more than looking back at history and looking forward to God's future plans. The season of Advent is about right now, today, and our lives as followers of Jesus.

The season of Advent asks each of us to think about how we are living the life of faith now.

The season of Advent asks us to pay attention to the ways we welcome Jesus into our lives now,

and how being followers of Jesus changes how we live our lives.

I am inviting you to journey with me through Advent using a book that was read last year by one of the Adult Sunday School classes. The book is by the Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton, and is entitled: "The Journey, Walking the Road to Bethlehem."

Today we are going to journey with Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Now when we think of Mary, us as someone to learn from, it may feel like there is no way to compare our lives to her life.

We may feel overwhelmed as we look at this young woman who was brave enough to say yes to God, yes to being the mother of the Savior,

Yes, to escaping to Egypt with Joseph and their young son, to live as refugees after his birth,

Yes, to raising him in Nazareth, at some point probably becoming a single parent,

Yes, to letting go of Jesus as he went into the life and ministry he was called to,

Yes, to standing at the foot of his cross as he died,

Yes, to welcoming him risen and then seeing him ascend into heaven,

And yes, to helping shape the early years of the Christian church as she told others the stories of his birth and early life.

While we wonder how someone so great can influence our lives today, and help us on this journey to through Advent to Christmas morning, it is helpful to look at what we know about Mary's life.

She was from the town of Nazareth which was a small town of maybe 100 to 400 people. It

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). It wasn't even mentioned by Josephus, a 1st century historian.

If someone was telling you about the towns of that area they wouldn't have talked about Nazareth, but the town of Sepphoris, an hour's walk from Nazareth, with a population of about 30,000 people.

Sepphoris was a much more affluent city. Excavations have shown it to be a city of culture, shopping, and relative wealth (p. 15). Many of the people of Nazareth would have walked to Sepphoris to work, to shop and to sell their goods in the markets.

Nazareth was like the small towns of today that you describe as having main street and no stop lights. Sepphoris was the big city the people travelled to for the good shopping and the better jobs.

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) (p. 15-16).

Adam Hamilton the author whose book we are using asks, why would God choose this tiny town to find the young woman to become the mother of the Son of God? Why did God choose a place looked down on by others?

He wonders: "What does it tell us about God that this story did not take place Sepphoris among the wealthy living in their luxury villas, but instead in Nazareth among working class people?...What does it tell you about whom God can use to accomplish God's purposes, or where God's favor lies?" (20.0-21.3)

Part of the answer Hamilton gives is that: "God chooses the least likely to accomplish God's most important work. (For instance): God chose a slave people to be his chosen people (Israel). God called the youngest of Jesse's seven shepherding sons, David, to become Israel's greatest king." (21.5)

Scripture is very clear over and over again, God doesn't always do what you expect God to do!

Mary came from a small town. Clearly what was important to God wasn't where she was from, but who she was.

Scholars think that Mary was probably a young girl of maybe about thirteen years of age. This was a common age for girls to be married in those days.

While that sounds shocking to us today, we need to remember that in Mary's time the average life expectancy was only 35 years. A thirteen-year-old wasn't considered a teenager, but a woman, ready to get married and start a family.

It was not at all unusual that she was engaged to Joseph in her early teens. Usually there was "a year-long legal engagement, followed by a formal ceremony," followed by married life together, with the hope of a new baby every year. (22.2)

I appreciate that Adam Hamilton then writes: "Mature or not, Mary was no better prepared for the visit of an angel than any of us might be."

I think one of the greatest understatements in the story of Mary is when we read that the angel Gabriel "came to Mary and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

How could she not be perplexed and wondering what this angel's greeting meant in her life? Anyone would be perplexed. Many of God's people have been perplexed through the years as they

have heard God's call.

Then the angel Gabriel shows us the loving care of God when he said: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Adam Hamilton asks an interesting question: "Did Mary want to be Mary? He writes" Thirteen-year-old Mary...heard the words of the messenger, and she tried desperately to take it all in.

Would she really be the mother of the Messiah?

She was to be pregnant, though out of marriage.

What would her family think? What would Joseph do?

She asked Gabriel, "Tell me once more, how will this thing be?"

Mary listens to Gabriel's answer: "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, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to 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."

Hamilton writes: "...with her head spinning, filled with questions, uncertain what it all meant, Mary's response to Gabriel was simple and profound. She did not need to understand fully. She simply said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'" (Luke 1:38)

Adam Hamilton invites us to realize the crucial role Mary played in God's plans for the salvation of the world through Jesus. Mary's answer to Gabriel helped shape world history. We'll never know what God's back-up plan was. What we know is that Mary said "yes, here I am."

And Hamilton adds these beautiful words: "Her saying yes (~~assent~~) set in motion the mystery of the incarnation. (God taking on human flesh in Jesus). As a consequence of her willingness, Mary's own body knit together the Messiah. It was her blood that carried nutrients to the child. It was her tender words, spoken and sung as mothers do to the children in their wombs, that quieted and comforted him. For nine months, divinity resided within her womb...the early church called her *Theotokos*—the one who gives birth to God—as a way of capturing both the identity of her son and the importance of her role in this story.

When Mary finally gave birth to Jesus...the Son of God was fed and sustained by her milk (~~the milk from her breasts~~). She tenderly held him. She changed his diapers and bathed him and sang him to sleep. She taught him and instilled in him faith in God. (~~in his heavenly Father~~). She feared for him, cried for him, and more than anything, loved him." (30.1f)

In this season of Advent, we who love and follow Jesus are invited into a journey, where we too may be surprised by how God is able to use us in God's plans for our own day and time.

It's easy to think that someone greater than us, from a bigger, more important place, would probably be better at serving God.

But in looking at Mary's life, a young girl from the tiny town of Nazareth, invites us into a different reality. We are invited into God's reality, where our yes to God's call can also make a difference in God's plans in the world around us.

Mary invites us into the season of Advent, calling to us to:

Be willing to be interrupted in the midst of daily life,

To be willing to being invited on a journey we never expected.

To be willing to be scared, uncertain and most definitely perplexed.

To be willing to have our well-planned weeks before Christmas, changed by God's

Advent plans for our lives.

Mary asks us to join her, in saying yes to whatever God has planned.

Mary has given us the words: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

Amen.

The Advent Sermon Series “THE JOURNEY--WALKING THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM—WITH...” is based in part on: Hamilton, Adam, *The Journey—Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, 2016

“We are all meant to be mothers of God...for God is always needing to be born.” — Meister Eckhart