

“Mary of Nazareth”

Date: Nov. 30, 2014
Place: Lakewood UMC
Text: Luke 1:26-38

Occasion: Advent 1,
sermon series “The Journey”
Theme:

On this first Sunday of Advent, we’re beginning a sermon series, using Adam Hamilton’s book called *“The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem.”* In the next four weeks we’ll take a deeper look at the characters in this familiar story, the places where the story unfolds, and maybe discover some things we didn’t know before.

Most of us have heard the Christmas story so many times before, we think we know all there is to it. And yet, there is much more to the Christmas drama than meets the eye. There are details we may have missed entirely.

And there are certainly places where the picture we have in our mind’s eye is actually wrong. The purpose of our Advent journey is to explore the story of Jesus’ birth with fresh eyes and ears. Each Sunday we will look at the cast of characters and the geography where the tale unfolds.

To help us continue the journey, we have Advent devotionals with daily readings. If we run out and you would like a copy, please let me know and we’ll order more. During the week I’ll be hosting a study group, where we’ll watch a DVD, that takes us to the Holy Land and lets us visit the actual places where these blessed events took place.

So I invite you, to come along on this sacred journey. The Christmas story begins in the town of Nazareth nine months before the birth of Jesus. Why there? Good question! Today the city is more widely known than it was in Jesus’ day. Back then it was an

insignificant little town. Its population is estimated to have been between one hundred and four hundred people.

A native, if he met a stranger who wanted to know where he was from, might well have mentioned Sepphoris, a large nearby town which had a population of 30,000 and was well-known. Sepphoris was comparatively affluent, with culture, shopping and other things that a prosperous town is known for.

If you lived in Nazareth, it was likely that you walked an hour each way to sell your goods and services in Sepphoris. Nazareth was a town of farmers, shepherds and laborers, not affluent people by any means.

Evidence shows that some of them may have built their homes in and around the area's soft limestone caves. It was the least expensive form of housing in the first century, and a sign of relative poverty. Some believe that Mary may have lived in a cave, or in a mud house built on top of a cave, which served as a cellar.

People didn't think well of Nazareth. In John's Gospel, Philip wanted his friend Nathanael to come and meet the promised Messiah. Nathanael says, "Can anything *good* come out of Nazareth?" It was an unlikely place for the Messiah to hail from.

But that is part of the proclamation. The setting of this story tells us that God looks for the meek and the humble to use for his greatest purposes. God chooses the least likely to accomplish his most important work. God chose a slave people to be his *chosen* people.

God called David to be Israel's *greatest* king, the youngest of Jesse's seven shepherd-sons. Paul says to the Christians in Corinth: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose

what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-28)

Mary called Nazareth, this humble village, her home. Let’s look more closely at the woman God chose to be the mother of the Christ. She was likely uneducated and probably came from a poor family who may well have been servants in a house-hold in Sepphoris. They were people without pretense, just honest, hard-working people. They walked humbly with their God.

Mary was likely a girl of thirteen, although a more mature 13-year old than we might expect. Young women married at that age back then. We would find it strange today, but at a time when the average life expectancy was less than 35 years old, and most people didn’t go to school, girls were considered women when they had their first menstrual period. They typically married shortly after that.

Mary was engaged to be married. According to custom, there would be a year-long legal engagement, followed by a formal ceremony. Finally, she and her husband would consummate their marriage and begin having children.

Mature or not, Mary was no better prepared, for the visit of an angel, than any of us might be. The word “angel” is a Greek word that means “messenger.” We think of winged creatures, but more likely Gabriel appeared to Mary as an ordinary man.

There is no indication in Scripture that she was terrified by his appearance, only his message. She would become pregnant and give birth to the Savior of the world. Gabriel told Mary to name her son *Yeshua*, which means “God helps,” or “God saves,” or “God

delivers.” *Yeshua* was a common name in Mary’s day, think of the common name Joshua, which is a variation of *Yeshua*.

Jesus was indeed destined to be a deliverer. However, he would deliver the human race not by the power of a sword, but by the power of his cross, his resurrection, and the message he taught. As Christians who celebrate Christmas, the birth of Jesus, we celebrate the birth of a deliverer, God’s Son.

We also celebrate his kingdom, a kingdom not defined by geography, but by the faith and devotion of all who call him Savior and Lord. Jesus would later describe this kingdom not so much as a place, but as a way of living.

The citizens of God’s kingdom love God *and* they love their neighbor. They even love their enemies and pray for those who have wronged them. They forgive and act as peacemakers. Christians believe that in knowing, loving and serving Jesus as their king, they find life, salvation and hope. You don’t buy that in Walmart.

Thirteen-year old Mary heard the words of the messenger, and she desperately tried to take it all in. Would she really be the mother of the Messiah? She was to be pregnant, though out of wedlock. What would her family think? What would Joseph do? She asked Gabriel, “Tell me once more, how will this thing be?”

And yet, with her head still spinning, filled with questions, uncertain what it all meant, Mary gave her answer, short and simple. “Here am I, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

Mary said “Yes,” despite knowing that, according to the Law, young women who were legally engaged but found to be pregnant by

someone other than their betrothed were to be stoned to death. She said, “Yes,” despite knowing that some women died in childbirth.

She said, “Yes,” despite knowing that it would mean the end of the dreams she had for her wedding day, knowing that Joseph would likely call off the wedding. She said, “Yes,” despite knowing that she might be an unwed mother with child.

As we consider that moment of decision for Mary, we see in her a witness and an example of how we are to live. Her mission reminds us that God’s call is sometimes difficult. It may lead us to lay aside our own plans. It may mean giving up hopes and dreams that we have cherished for a long time. It may mean risks. It may be frightening.

Sometimes God asks us to be with people we don’t want to be with, to go to places we don’t want to go to, and to do things we don’t want to do. This is part of what Mary’s story teaches us. But knowing how Mary responded, we are inspired to say with her, “Here I am Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”

As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, we remember the little town of Nazareth and God’s choice of a young woman from this humble village. Through her, God would do his greatest work. This season offers us the invitation to offer ourselves as wholly to God as Mary did. Christmas is not about how much you buy or what you eat or whom you visit. It is about our willingness to say with Mary, “Here am I, Lord. Use me according to your will.” Amen.

Adapted from Adam Hamilton’s book, *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, “Mary of Nazareth,” p. 13 – 31.