

NAZARETH: MARY AND GABRIEL

Text: Luke 1:26-38

LHUMC 12/8/13

Advent 2

“Stations of the Birth” #2

I. Introduction

- A. Have you sensed some similarities between today’s story and last week’s? And there are certainly significant similarities.
 - 1. Both are called “Annunciation” stories (where God makes an announcement to someone)
 - 2. Both involve an angel (actually the same angel—Gabriel) as an intermediary to actually make the announcement. And to both, Gabriel’s first words are “Don’t be afraid” (which is actually a common theme in all of the angelic appearances throughout the story of the birth)
 - 3. And then there is the obvious similarity in the announcements—both are announcements of miraculous pregnancies and impending births.
 - 4. In both, there is also the mention of the Holy Spirit’s role in those births.
 - 5. And both speak of the importance of the sons that are to be born—last week Gabriel told Zechariah that the son born to him and Elizabeth would “achieve great stature with God” and would “prepare the people for who was to come.” Today, Mary hears an even more amazing thing—that her son was to be called “Son of the Most High.”
- B. But as I’ve been pondering the stories from a more “geographical perspective”, what is more striking to me are the differences.
 - 1. Beginning with the places.
 - a) You could not have two more different stations than where we’ve been the last two weeks.
 - 1) Last week, we were in Jerusalem—The largest city in the region, the center of political, military and religious power.
 - 2) And specifically, we were in the Temple—Herod’s Temple to be specific—lavishly rebuilt by Herod the Great—Marble and gold on the outside, lavishly appointed on the inside, etc. etc.
 - 3) And then today, we’re in Nazareth—the hometown of Mary, and eventual hometown of her son Jesus. (Map/Picture)

- 4) To call Nazareth a small town might be giving it too much credit.
 - 5) We like to sing this time of year about “O Little Town of Bethlehem”, but if that’s true, then maybe we need to also sing “O Even Littler Town of Nazareth”.
 - 6) You know what people mean when they talk about a “One stoplight town”? That’s Bethlehem. Nazareth may have had a four-way stop sign...maybe.
 - 7) How do historians conclude that Nazareth was such a one-horse (or one-camel) town? They know that it wasn’t on any kind of main road, which was the main sign of significance for any town in the ancient world.
 - 8) There is also this fun fact that I learned this week—that Nazareth is never mentioned in any literature outside the Bible that we know about until the 7th century AD, when it shows up in passing on a list in a piece of Jewish literature that mentions where some of the different priestly clans come from.
 - 9) It’s never mentioned in the Old Testament either, and even when it is mentioned in the New Testament, it isn’t always in a favorable light. What is it the Pharisees say about Jesus at one point? Something to the effect that “Nothing good could ever come from Nazareth”. Such apparently was the attitude toward small towns back then, at least this particular small town.
 - 10) And the citizens of Nazareth are the ones who try to run Jesus out of town and push him off a cliff when he has the audacity to preach in the synagogue there and say some things they don’t want to hear.
2. And it is in large part because of the places in which they live and have been raised, that these characters we’ve met, Zechariah and Mary, are so incredibly different.
- a) Apart from the obvious—one being old, the other young—one being involved only “second hand” in the birth as the father, the other reality is that “upward mobility” just didn’t happen back then. Where you started in life is pretty much where you were guaranteed to end up, for better or worse.
 - b) If you were born into a priestly family like Zechariah, you were destined to be a priest—with all the training and education that went with that exalted position.

c) And in the case of Mary, if you were born a small town kid, that was where you were destined to spend your life.

3. So the differences in the places and the people are as significant as the similarities—perhaps even more so, as we'll see in a minute.

II. So I've been pondering this place, and why God would choose to send Gabriel to this place as the next place in the story of the birth. Why not just keep Gabriel in Jerusalem? If God was looking for just the right candidate to be the mother of our Lord, you'd think there were far more eligible candidates there—lots of women there of wealth and privilege, women who were part of the “establishment”, who could have raised the child in comfort, who could have sent him to the right schools and all the rest. And yet God chooses a girl from this place. Why Nazareth?

A. I've actually been pondering small towns in general.

1. For I (like John Mellencamp) was born in a small town.
2. This fall we drove through that small town for the first time in a number of years, and I hardly recognized it (and not all the changes were positive changes)
3. We lived in a small town before we came here, and we experienced the grief first-hand in that place when the only grocery store closed and the main employer shut its doors and moved to Mexico and the downtown and many of the houses just sort of crumbled into oblivion.
4. My experience tells me that these days at least, living in a small town isn't always easy.
5. Historians will tell us that living in a small town was a tough life back then too.
6. Nazareth was located in the hill country, where it was tough to live off the land—keeping sheep and goats were the best way to get by, but that was about it.
7. So what does it say about God and this story and perhaps most of all about the child that God chose someone from this place as his mother?
8. You can see why the first reaction of so many people went something like this: The Messiah? From Nazareth? You've got to be kidding me!
9. But then as I thought about it a little more, I began to understand.
10. I began to understand how the place and the person are part of the message (as Mary clearly understood in the song that she sang right after today's passage).

11. If this Messiah was sent into the world to show God's love to all people, especially to those people who know something about tough times and tough places, if this was really to be the Messiah that Isaiah and the other prophets foretold, how could we be in any other place than Nazareth?
 12. Karoline Lewis sums it up when says, "This person (and this place) remind us that God favors everyone."
(www.workingpreacher.com)
 13. God favors everyone—not just the religious insiders down in Jerusalem where we were last week but also a small town kid right here in Nazareth. Especially a small town kid in Nazareth, who God chooses to carry out the most important role in the story.
 14. That we are here in Nazareth today reminds us that God favors us too, wherever we find ourselves in life (geographically or spiritually).
 15. Maybe in the end, it's here in Nazareth in the home of Mary that we receive the true meaning of Christmas—that God favors everyone.
 16. That no matter what kind of tough place we came from or what kind of tough place we find ourselves in, God favors us.
 17. And just like last week's message, it's so counter-cultural. We live in a world that tells us that those who are most favored at Christmas are the ones with the most presents under the tree.
 18. And while I'm no historian, I can tell you with some certainty that we can be pretty sure there weren't any Best Buys or Sam's Clubs in Nazareth.
- B. And then I'm also pondering another difference between Zechariah and Mary that might have something to do with the places they were from.
1. Have you ever noticed how differently they react to God's call? And maybe seen the irony in it?
 2. Here is a learned and highly educated priest, who no doubt knows the Bible up one side and down the other.
 3. And yet last week, when Gabriel came to him and announced that he and his wife were going to have a baby in their old age, what was the first thing he said? "Do you expect me to believe this?"
 4. And then this week, we have Mary. Gabriel comes to her with an even more astounding message—a baby promised to a virgin. And what is her first reaction? "I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me, just as you say."

5. Do you see the irony? The one who is the insider, part of the establishment, the one with a ph.D in Biblical studies and theology, doesn't get it—he can't at first at least, accept the miraculous for what it really is.
6. The one who is poor and illiterate and completely inexperienced in the ways of the world and the ways of God, is the one who gets it.
7. A part of me wonders whether where she was raised had something to do with it. Maybe there was an innocence or even a certain naivete that she had from being raised in this simple place that made it possible for her to so quickly say “yes” to God's plan for her.
8. This part of the story always reminds me of a story told by Fred Craddock, who loved to tell stories about the small town he grew up in and the characters that were a part of it: “Used to have a kid down home who'd believe anything you'd tell him. You could say, “The schoolhouse burned down. We're not having school tomorrow.” “Oh boy!” He'd believe it. “They're giving away free watermelons down at the town hall.” “Really? Free watermelons?” He'd go running off. “Did you know the president of the United States is coming here tomorrow?” “He is? Really? Whoopee!” He just believed everything. I remember once there was an evangelist who came to our town, and he said to that kid, “God loves you and cares for you and comes to you in Jesus Christ.” And do you know that kid believed it? He actually believed it.”
9. God came to Mary here in Nazareth through the angel Gabriel and said, “God favors you, Mary, and because he favors you so much you are going to bear God's son.” And she believed it. She actually believed it.

III. Conclusion

A. And maybe that's our problem.

1. Maybe we're sometimes too much like Zechariah. Maybe we think we know too much about God, that we've figured Him out, maybe we're too comfortable with our place in the Temple, maybe we're too learned about it all to really get it when it comes to Christmas sometimes.
2. Maybe it takes a field trip back to Nazareth to be with Mary if we're going to reclaim not just the simplicity of the story, but the real meaning of it.

3. Maybe we need to be in Nazareth so that we can be a little less worldly and a little more innocent and even naïve about the whole thing.
 4. Maybe we need to be in Nazareth to understand that with God, nothing is impossible (to quote our friend Gabriel).
 5. Maybe we need to be in Nazareth to understand that God still favors each of us enough to call us once more to play our role in the story, even or especially when we find ourselves in the most unlikely, out-of-the-way, even tough places in life.
 6. And maybe we need to be in Nazareth to know who Jesus was to become, and more importantly, who Jesus still is.
 7. Because don't forget, that like his mother, Jesus grew up here too—in this little, out-of-the-way place, where he learned first-hand that life can be tough sometimes.
 8. And it's pretty clear that as he grew up, he never forgot where he came from.
- B. And so as we find ourselves here in this place at this time of year in the midst of this story, we too can remember that we are part of a story that still happens in out-of-the-way places—places where people struggle to get by, places where we are called to go to be the presence of Christ.
- C. And as we come across people who need that kind of love, may we not forget that we've been here, in the presence of the one who perhaps because she grew up here, had the faith and the courage to say "let it be with me".
- D. May her faith be our faith. May her witness be our witness.