

“Mary from Nazareth”

November 29, 2015

People and Place of Christmas - 1st Sunday of Advent

Gospel writer Luke is a like a good reporter. He gives us the *who, what, and where* as we learn about Jesus. When it comes to Jesus, Luke and Matthew are the two Gospel writers who spend time telling us about what happened before Jesus was born. The people and places of Christmas are important because they tell us more about Jesus himself – and about how God works in us and others.

Today we focus on Mary from Nazareth. The general image of Mary is a young and meek girl – probably in her early teens. She’s greeted by Gabriel and told that she’ll bear the Son of God. Many of us view her as the girl who got a message from God and went along with it. But I wonder how Mary might tell her own story.

DRAMA – “BIGGER PLANS”

It was Martin Luther – the Protestant reformer of the 1500’s – who said that one of the miracles of Christmas is that Mary believed. She was all but married to Joseph and ready to begin a new phase of life she had always dreamed about – family and children. But then the angel came. For all she had planned, God called her to risk her future, her reputation, her whole life. God asked her to be faithful. God changed her plans and gave her new dreams to grab hold of. She opened herself to God and offered herself as a part of God’s plan for the salvation of the world.

We take it for granted as we read these verses from Luke, but Mary was scandalous! The news she receives is shocking! To think that a young virgin would be part of God’s salvation plan! Are you kidding?

But God’s plans aren’t always our plans, are they? How many of you like to plan? For as much as we like to have it all planned out, for as much as we like to know what to expect from life, and for as much as we don’t like surprises, God doesn’t always work that way. The people and places of Christmas remind us of that.

Yes, there’s Mary herself, but it’s important that she’s from Nazareth. It’s not a big place or an important place. It’s a little place in the region of Galilee that doesn’t mean much to anyone. There are probably just a few hundred people living there. It was nearby Sepphoris that had more going on. And, the region of Galilee wasn’t populated by only Jews. In fact, most scholars believe that there was a significant Gentile population there, too.

Mary, the woman who will bear the Christ child, isn’t of high social status. She doesn’t come from a well-known and highly-regarded Jewish family. She is simply a

young Jewish woman from a town that no one really paid much attention to or cared about. She was from a humble place. She was a humble person.

The people who lived in Jerusalem wouldn't have given Nazareth a second thought. One writer says that Nazareth would've been considered "the boonies" in its own time. Later, when Jesus calls Philip and then Philip invites Nathanael to "come and see" Jesus, this man from Nazareth, Nathanael asks what good can come from there! It's not a popular place!

But the name Nazareth is significant. Pastor Adam Hamilton says that Nazareth comes from the Hebrew word "netzer," which means branch or shoot. Hamilton makes the connection back to the prophet Isaiah in chapter 11 that we read earlier – a shoot that will come up from the stump of Jesse, a branch from his roots. Naming the place Nazareth was an expression of hope in God's promise of the Messiah who would redeem Israel. It's Mary – this young woman from Nazareth who will bring the hope of the world.

So we know the basics from Luke – Mary, the message, and the place. But it's important to hear that Gabriel pronounces Mary as "blessed." She is someone whom God favors. We may need to focus on that word "blessed." It doesn't mean having what we want in terms of money, power, or prestige, but being used by God for God's purposes. Gabriel also tells Mary not to be afraid – it's a common greeting when God comes to folks and calls them – probably because it's scary!

Mary is not the first, nor the last to be called by God, but she stands in line with all those who have been called to serve God. And her role is special and set apart. Mary has questions as I bet most of us would have. She tries to make sense of it, and ends us saying "yes" to God. Author Madeline L'Engle writes:

*This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason,
There had been no room for the child!*

Mary from "nowhere land" Nazareth - pregnant by the Holy Spirit even as she plans to marry Joseph. This is not perfect. This is not ideal. This is not what's expected. No wonder the angel's greeting is "Do not be afraid!" No matter the emotional turmoil, the physical cost, the mental difficulty, "do not be afraid!"

Mary teaches us about faith and grace. She is favored by God – as we all are – beloved and cherished. And she had to believe in God's presence with her in order for all of this to come to pass – to be able to say, "Let it be as you say..."

She had to believe that God is faithful and that God is gracious. She didn't quit, but knew the blessing of walking with God even as she asked, "How can this be?" Not

perfect by our standards, but blessed to be a part of God's incredible miracle! And in the midst of a mess and all that came with it for Mary, God was there and gave her encouragement through the love and encouragement of Joseph and Elizabeth, whom we'll hear about in the coming weeks.

No it wasn't perfect, and it isn't for us today. Maybe we're hurting or our loved ones are hurting. On Thanksgiving, I spent time with my family and had a wonderful meal. But I also went to visit my grandma. She is healing after a broken leg. And in the midst of her struggle, she realized she hadn't called her good friend who had a birthday. My sister, mom, uncle, and I listened as she talked to her friend on the phone and told her how glad she was for their friendship. It was moving even as she was in pain and having a bad day.

There are struggles and strains just among us. But I also know God's faithfulness in this midst of those situations – and the powerful witness of faith that we offer one another. In our pain, others find hope in the midst of their own pain. To speak about how God shows up when life is not perfect is a vital part of our life together.

And the world is hurting! Violence, innocent people dead, families grieving, other struggling with the justice system, flooding that has claimed lives, preventable diseases still claiming lives, people living without clean water, HIV/AIDS continuing to claim many lives, including children, human trafficking, people living in fear and oppression and seeking safety and refuge in a new place. This is the world for whom Mary bore the Christ child – for the vulnerable, marginalized, the sick, the lonely, the frightened – and for those who don't feel that way. Mary's "yes" was for the world – hers and ours.

Mary's story reminds us that we're a part of God's story, too. As one writer says, "At Christmas we are all called to birth and cradle Christ in our own lives." How will you say "yes" to God and share the news of God's grace at work to redeem the world? God is calling you and me to share Christ – to bear Christ – to make him real – to others so that his love is real.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.