

Sermon Series: *Journey to Bethlehem Week 1 (Journey with Mary)* November 29, 2015

The Hebrew Scriptures: Isaiah 11: 1-4, 6 *The Living Bible*

The royal line of David will be cut off, chopped down like a tree; but from the stump will grow a Shoot - yes, a new Branch from the old root. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, and might; the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. His delight will be obedience to the Lord. He will not judge by appearance, false evidence, or hearsay, but will defend the poor and the exploited. He will rule against the wicked who oppress them. In that day the wolf and the lamb will lie down together, and the leopard and goats will be at peace. Calves and fat cattle will be safe among lions, and a little child shall lead them all.

The Gospel: Luke 1:26-38 *JB Phillips Translation*

Then, six months after Zacharias' vision, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a Galilean town, Nazareth by name, to a young woman who was engaged to a man called Joseph. The girl's name was Mary. The angel entered her room and said, "Greetings to you, Mary. O favored one! - the Lord be with you!"

Mary was deeply perturbed at these words and wondered what such a greeting could possibly mean. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; God loves you dearly. You are going to be the mother of a son, and you will call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be known as the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His forefather, David, and He will be king over the people of Jacob forever. His reign shall never end."

Then Mary spoke to the angel, "How can this be," she said, "I am a virgin?"

But the angel made this reply to her - "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Your child will therefore be called holy - the Son of God. Your cousin Elizabeth has also conceived a son, old as she is. Indeed, this is the sixth month for her, a woman who was called barren. For no promise of God can fail to be fulfilled."

"I belong to the Lord, body and soul," replied Mary, "let it happen as you say." And at this the angel left her.

This morning is the beginning of Advent... this mysterious, silent, and inner season of the church year; a season of the heart. Carl Sandburg wrote a poem called, *Fog*, that starts out, "The fog comes on little cat feet. It sits looking over harbor and city on silent haunches." This is how I imagine Advent... that it comes in silently and watches with us as we wait for the coming of Jesus. We're not sitting still on our haunches like Sandburg's cat. Instead, waiting for the coming of Jesus is a journey. Faith itself is a journey... and it begins now in this season of Advent.

We begin the Advent journey traveling to a backwater town called Nazareth, a town so insignificant that it's not among any of the villages mentioned in ancient Jewish writings. The name Nazareth comes from the word "natzer" which means branch or "shoot"... just as the prophecy we've heard from Isaiah refers to the Messiah who will come from the branch, the "shoot" of King David's father Jesse. In Nazareth we're introduced to a girl simply known as Mary. There's something significant here for us, that God chose this insignificant place and this unknown girl to accomplish God's plan

to be with us, to be one of us. Throughout our history as God's people we see that God has used ordinary people to bring about extraordinary things. That's too significant to us to not hear again: God uses ordinary people to bring about extraordinary things.

Mary was young, poor, uneducated, and unmarried. But God chose her to be the beautiful name the Greek Orthodox Church calls her, "Theotokos" which means "God-bearer."

During Advent we anticipate and celebrate the coming of Jesus... His first "journey" into the world as the baby born in a manger, and His second journey - His second "coming"... when He will come again to bring healing and redemption to all the world. The evidence all around us says that it's already Christmas, but this is really Advent. Christmas (the real Christmas not the retail Christmas) belongs to Jesus, but Advent seems somehow to belong to Mary.

It was just Thanksgiving *three days ago* and many of us are trying to figure out how many days to keep turkey leftovers in the fridge before we can remove them to the green-bin. And it's already Advent. I'm still using up holiday napkins with autumn leaves and acorns and... it's already Advent. Andy and I commented to each other how surprisingly fast Advent shows up, really before we're ready. Mary probably wasn't ready to be visited by an angel, who came with an outrageous message from God.

An angel appeared to Mary... and it seems to me that Mary was a surprise to the angel; that Mary took the angel's breath away. Because the angel saw that Mary, an ordinary human girl, was full of grace, full of God's grace. Grace is the love, and kindness, and the blessings, that God pours into our lives. Grace is God's gift, nothing we can earn or deserve; grace is simply reflective of who God is, a gift-giver. The angel saw that Mary was full of God's grace, and told her that she would give birth to God's Son, who would *embody* God's grace. This Son, Jesus, would be a unique child, both human and divine... God's son, and Mary's son.

Mary was young and poor and uneducated but she was full of grace, full of God-gifts. Her response to the angel - even while knowing that being unmarried and pregnant (nevermind being mysteriously/weirdly pregnant by the power of God's Holy Spirit) was punishable by death - still Mary's response was, "I belong to the Lord, body and soul. Let it happen as you say." Mary said "Yes!" to God. And Mary's "Yes!" set into motion - her "Yes!" gave birth - to God's plan to be one of us, and one with us, and to redeem our humanity. Our Catholic brothers and sisters elevate Mary to divine status, consider her a mediator between us and Jesus, and pray to her. And we Protestant Christians... we bring out Mary once a year and put her in the nativity scene with Joseph and the donkeys and the shepherds. And then the rest of the year we forget about this young girl who was so full of God-gifts that God chose her to be the mother of God's Son, Jesus, who would embody both His divinity and Mary's (and our) humanity.

Last night I put our nativity on the dining room table (all the cast of characters except for Jesus, who isn't laid in the manger until Christmas Eve) and set Mary beside me. She is kneeling with her hands crossed around her heart; it seems to me to both honor her heart and to protect it. Mary was poor, young, uneducated... but her pose: kneeling, meditative, listening, waiting, says that Mary was a contemplative. To be contemplative is to be silent and able to let go of the ego's demands for attention; it is to still the chatter within to make a simple, holy, welcoming place for God; it is to be empty

of self in order to be filled with God. This was who Mary was, and why the angel recognized that she was filled with God, filled with grace.

God didn't choose someone to birth God's Son into our world who was a brilliant leader, a talented achiever, a moral perfectionist. God chose a contemplative; a young person who was practiced in the spiritual disciplines of listening, trusting, and surrendering herself to God... and because of that she was able to say "I belong to the Lord..." when the angel let her in on God's plan to fully include human participation in God's salvation.

Christmas is about Jesus, but Advent...seems to belong to Mary. Advent is an inner season, of the heart, of what Mary practiced and modeled for us: contemplation. But in this season the increasing violence and war, and the hatred and intolerance, in the world feels like an affront to Isaiah's prophecy, his glorious God-inspired vision of "that day [when] the wolf and the lamb will lie down together, and the leopard and goats will be at peace. Calves and fat cattle will be safe among lions, and a little child shall lead them." It feels like the darkness, the shorter days and longer nights, is now personified on the stage of power-hungry politicians, rampant terrorism, desperate refugees, and everywhere we look... human misery. And in the darkness of these days there is even an appallingly short supply of simple human kindness. Dear God. What does it mean, in this darkness, in our world, for us to be like Mary, to be contemplative, to kneel, physically and figuratively, with hope and trust that You are at work here in the world, and in us?

If we are going to take this Advent journey with Mary (and it's a choice to journey with her, and with very little encouragement from those around us) we need to still the voices of fear and hatred and intolerance and hopelessness... the voices around us, and within us. We need to picture, as Isaiah did, the world as God has envisioned it.

During November I challenged us to keep lists of what we are thankful for, to count our gifts, God's blessings. The tree of blessings is on the wall just for today and then it comes down to make room for the "greening" of our sanctuary. The counting and listing was a spiritual practice. Practicing our faith is how we grow spiritually and emotionally, and how we become like Mary... full of grace.

Our spiritual practice for Advent is contemplation, and like noticing and counting gifts it's a gentle and easy practice. Kurt Teichmann told me this fall that for five minutes a day he was practicing looking at something beautiful, something to be thankful for. That started my journey of counting gifts... all that I am thankful for. Today the journey of Advent begins. This afternoon find your nativity set and pull Mary aside. Spend five minutes with her... just look at her her... and ask yourself, ask God, how a simple, uneducated, unsophisticated, unknown girl can show you: Trust. Hope. How to be empty in order to be filled with God. Filled with grace. As often as you can during this season, this inner, heart-season of Advent, spend just five minutes with Jesus' mother, Mary and: Be still. Listen. Contemplate. Wait, with trust and hope, for the coming of Jesus. Amen.