

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Text: Luke 1:26-38

Title: “The Journey: Mary of Nazareth—Willingness”

Advent is the beginning of the liturgical calendar in the Christian Church. And this year we begin with a new series during which we'll be taking a look at those who were principle characters in the journey toward Christmas, people who were part of the journey of God becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. And if you are part of one of the groups studying the journey toward Bethlehem, you'll have the opportunity to get a broader understanding of this story that is one of the most widely known stories in the world and one of the most treasured stories of our faith: Jesus born in a manger.

It's a story we think we all know, and I expect some of us think we know it so well there's nothing else to learn. I thought so, too, until I learned one day years ago that the story of the three kings we have heard over and over again isn't exactly right. We have a hymn that tells us there were three kings. Christmas cards always have three, but if you read Matthew's story of the magi coming to find Jesus in chapter 2, it never says how many magi there were, just that there were three gifts. Somewhere along the way, the number of gifts became associated with the number of magi. I was surprised by this the first time I became aware of it, but it taught me that I always have more to learn, especially about stories I think I already know so well I don't really need to look closely at them again.

I think this is probably true about Mary, too. What I mean is that I expect there is more for me to learn, that I don't know all there is to know about the figure of Mary, the one who gave birth to Jesus, or about the circumstances that surrounded his birth. I don't mean facts and figures. I don't mean historical details necessarily. Rather, I expect I have something to learn from Mary's story that has to do with God's involvement in the world.

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I say this because, as I said, sometimes the biblical story is so familiar to so many of us that we tend to skim over it, thinking we already know it. No need to really look at it more carefully. But with Mary, I wonder if we all have something to learn about how God is involved in life? Do we really trust that God is as actively involved in life as Mary's story reveals or is God more passive, standing at a distance? Less like Joan Osborn's or Alanis Morissette's, “What if God was one of us?”, and more like Bette Midler's, “From a Distance”.

To begin with, Mary is said to have come from Nazareth, and Nazareth is nowhere. At least it's not a place of high expectation. Nobody who is anybody comes from Nazareth. It was a small village of maybe a few hundred people, established as a community because there is a water source there, a well. In the first century it was just a stone's throw away from a large, metropolitan city called Sephoris. Now just a ruins, Sephoris was a well-to-do modern Roman city, and if you go there today you can still see beautiful mosaic floors. When Lynn and I were there, we were impressed by the incredible artistry of

those who created these floors from small pieces of black, white and colored squares typically measuring between less than a quarter inch and 5/8 of an inch but fine details were often rendered using even smaller pieces. These squares were cut from materials such as marble, tile, glass, smalto (glass paste), pottery, stone and even shells. A base was first prepared with fresh mortar and the tesserae positioned as close together as possible with any gaps then filled with liquid mortar. The same process we call grouting. The whole was then cleaned and polished. It took an artist to create these images that you would never find in the homes of those living in Nazareth. In fact, some of the homes in Nazareth were caves and tradition has it that Mary's family lived in a cave. A church is built over the cave it is believed by many to be the home of Mary. It was crude but for those who couldn't afford a stone structure built by craftsman, a cave served the purpose. Nazareth was very likely a bedroom community for those who served the wealthy in Sephoris.

The disparity between homes in Nazareth and Sephoris might be compared to the difference between homes you might see in rural Crump and the Dow executive homes on Valley Drive in Midland. Mary was from Crump.

The attitude locals had about Nazareth might be reflected in the Gospel of John when Jesus is calling his first disciples. Philip finds Nathanael and tells him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:45-46) Not exactly a hopeful critique of the little village, is it?

Yet, Nazareth, may in fact have been a village of promise. Because the name may derive from the Hebrew word, *netzer*, which means shoot. There are three Ash trees at our cottage that are victims of the Emerald Ash borer, but apparently the bugs can't kill the roots because now we have shoots growing out of the base of the trees that are now dead from the ground up. They can kill the upper part of the tree but the roots refuse to die.

Judah and Israel were both conquered by invading armies, killed from the ground up. Judah by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and Judah by the Babylonians in 586 or 587 B.C. In response to this death of the two kingdoms, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed God's word that

- 11 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
- 2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of might,  
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
- 3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.  
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,  
or decide by what he hears with his ears;

That shoot or *netzer* was to rise out of the roots of that which had been cut down by invading armies. Though it appeared to be a dead stump, the roots refused to die. That's the metaphor. Mary's home town may have been the reference to which Isaiah was referring.

Mary, scholars suggest, was probably a teenager – maybe 13—which apparently was a common age for marriage given a girl was considered an adult after her first menstrual cycle. She is approached by the messenger of God. "Angelos" in Greek means messenger. And Gabriel comes with a message, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!" *Mary was perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*

Why is Mary perplexed and pondering? Perplexed by definition means to be filled with difficulty

or uncertainty. Mary's immediate response was not, "Fantastic! I just can't wait. Thank you, God!" No, she found it difficult and wasn't quite sure what this was all about.

Maybe she remembered the well-known and often told stories of the conception of Alexander the Great and the Emperor Augustus both of whom were said to be sons of God when their mothers went into the temple of Apollo and while they were asleep in the temple, a snake came and wrapped itself around them and they became pregnant. Both men would use these stories as a basis for claiming power because they had been chosen by a god to exercise power. Ruling by violence and dominance, they established an empire through total domination.

Maybe Mary thought of those well-known stories as this messenger of God tapped on her shoulder with this greeting in which she heard that God favored her and was with her. And maybe part of her difficulty with this rose out of her own sense of who she was. Me? Who am I? Why am I favored? How can the Lord be with ME? She knows who she is and where she comes from. She's a teenager from the wrong side of the tracks. Why me?

Thinking about Mary being chosen by God reminded me of a story I heard at a seminar. It belongs to Dan Taylor who included it in a book, *Letters to My Children*. It is paraphrased, so please don't hold me to the details.

When I was a child in grade school, 3rd grade, I believe it was, our days of reading, writing and arithmetic were frequently interrupted for dancing. Our teacher would ask the boys to line up in the back of the room according to the numbers we had drawn from the hat.

I had number one. The procedure for this most uncomfortable routine involved all the boys choosing their dance partners. The girls stayed seated and anxiously awaited the moment their names would be called.

There was a girl in our class named Emily. She was a rather plain-looking girl, quiet. Had some sort of birth defect: one leg was shorter than the other. She limped with a slow, steady pace. Kids really didn't spend time with her much. And in this crude routine of choice, Emily was always chosen last. My teacher knew this. My teacher was a friend to my mother and knew me quite well. And so before the numbers were chosen, she whispered in my ear: "Please pick Emily. She's having a hard time right now."

As I stood at the front of the line scanning the class, there were Laura and Lindsey, girls I enjoyed playing with, smiling at me, and there was Emily. Her back turned away from the boys, kind of staring down at her desk, looking sad.

"Do I have to do this?", I asked myself. But as I looked at Emily and remembered my teacher's request, I blurted out: "I choose . . . Emily."

Her head snapped quickly as she turned to look at me with a wide, surprised grin across her face. My friends behind me and before me had expressions of shock and disbelief.

The choosing done, we danced. As our teacher counted, "One two three. One two three", I looked at the sparkle in the eyes and the smiling face of my partner and knew I had done the right thing.

Though Mary came from nowhere from whence nothing good could come, God chose her. Having been chosen, however, wasn't the end of Mary's hesitancy. The messenger had more to say to her. Gabriel tells her that she's going to be pregnant with a son, but not just any son, the Son of the Most High, no less, from the lineage of David, with a never—to—end kingdom. O.K. What? "How can this be?" This doesn't make any sense!

"The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be

called God's Son. 36 Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. 37 Nothing is impossible for God."

Unlike Alexander and Augustus, Jesus will not establish a kingdom through violence and domination. Jesus' kingdom will be ruled by the law of love. The God who fathers Jesus is One who transforms the world by his spirit of love and self-sacrifice. And though such things seem impossible, Gabriel reminds her that "Nothing is impossible for God."

With that Word, Mary finds herself moving from being perplexed to being willing: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."

So what do you think this says about who God is? God who comes to a young woman who is unlikely to be a star in the world, who has no power or wealth. God, who comes to a place from which no one famous or accomplished is known to have come. Even one of Jesus' disciples disparages Jesus' home town of Nazareth. God who comes with a message that this king, this "Son of mine", is not about establishing a rule based on the threat of violence and domination. God comes to the humblest of places and to the humblest of people to enter the world.

Do you think that God comes to Auburn in the same way? That God has chosen you through whom to be active in the world, to make the world a healthier, more God-like place to live? Do you trust that God's Spirit is as alive and as active in a place like Auburn or Bay City or Saginaw or Midland as God was alive and active in Nazareth? You, too, are God's chosen one. And the question for all of us this Advent is, "are we willing to give ourselves wholly to God as Mary did"? Are we able and willing to move from being perplexed about what God may be asking of us to being willing servants to make the world a healthier place where God's kingdom is realized?

Or maybe we're more like the description I read by a Presbyterian about Presbyterians:

Presbyterians are a rather conservative bunch. We're like the Methodists without the excitement. We never raise our hands in church. We can't. We're afraid if we raise them too high, God might call on us. In fact, we're so conservative, Christ could come back tomorrow and we'd form a committee to look into it.  
Robert G. Lee, *An Encyclopedia of Humor*, p.29.

Are we willing to allow God's Spirit to break into our lives and nudge us toward new journeys?