

12/22/24

“Jesus' Birth Announced”

Luke 1:26-45 [46-56]

I have a colleague who teaches classes on painting icons. Icons are religious works of art, but they are used to help usher people into an attitude of prayer. He has dozens of them hanging around the Center for Spiritual Formation, but one that always captures my attention is the Virgin Mary. In the icon Mary is holding the Christ child and just looks serene.

In the Holy Land there is a place called the Church of the Annunciation that has all of these different renderings of the Virgin Mary, but there is one that I would still love to see - one that depicts today's passage where Mary hears for the first time that she has been chosen to carry the Savior of the World.

We are told that in the sixth month the angel Gabriel, the same angel that had come to Zechariah, went to a town called Nazareth. Later in the Gospels, as Jesus is calling his disciples to come and follow him, one of them named Nathaniel made this powerful statement, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” That's because at the time, it barely had one-hundred people living there. It wasn't a place of honor or high-up officials. Mostly laborers and shepherds and some tradesmen and farmers lived there. And yet, it was out of this off the path, small place, that God put the plan of Salvation into motion.

We are told that Gabriel was to go to a virgin engaged to be married to Joseph. Engagement was very, very different in Biblical times than how we imagine it now. It involved a written and legally binding oath. The man would bring the woman a gift, and they would publicly engage in this oath, then they would wait about a year between being engaged and being married, so that the man could construct a place for his family to live.

Girls were betrothed as soon as they were able to have children. Men were usually a bit older, because they needed to be skilled in a trade well enough to support their family. During the time of engagement, the woman was to not go to social gatherings in order to stay out of compromising situations that could lead to gossip.

And this particular virgin who was engaged to be married, her name was Mary. Mary was just going about her daily life, when she heard the words from this celestial visitor that would change her life. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you”. He goes on to tell her not to be afraid, but that her life is going to forever be changed.

But the thing about Gabrielle, is that every time he shows up and tells folks to not be afraid, that is the most natural reaction for them to have! Gabrielle is an angel, who yes, is coming to bring good news, but is also an interruption to life as they know it who asks them to take a risk for the sake of God. Zechariah was to risk believing that God could do the impossible. Mary was to risk the ridicule that she knew that she would face from her community, becoming pregnant, even with the son of God, outside of wedlock. The shepherds were to risk tending their flocks in order to respond to a great invitation, directly from God.

After Gabriel unwound for Mary all that was to take place she had one question, how is this to be? Why a common girl from a town so small and insignificant that it wasn't even counted as being part of Galilee by her neighbors. Why not someone older? Or someone from Sepphoris, the next town over, with so many thousands of people to choose from? Why someone from Nazareth – where everyone knew everyone and the total population could not be more than 400? Why her? Why here? Why now? But despite all of that, she did not ask for proof like Zechariah did earlier in this chapter. Instead, she said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”

When I was little and it came to be Christmas pageant time, there was never a shortage of little girls who wanted to be Mary. But Rev. Adam Hamilton asks a thought-provoking

question, would Mary want to be Mary? She had to give up so much and take on a burden that many cannot fathom, but she still clearly answered, "Here I am. A servant of the Lord's."

Mary is revered around the world because of the words she said, but friends, as author Liz Curtis Higgs so eloquently puts it, "God didn't choose Mary because she was unique. Mary was unique because God chose her". Mary had a truly unique calling on her life, to give birth to the Savior of the World, but what makes Mary live into that call, what makes her worthy of that call, isn't her own work or piety. It's God's grace.

Here is Mary, who is probably still getting used to the idea of being a wife and now she is going to be a mother, but not just any mother, but the mother of the Savior of the World. She took a risk and said yes. Mary knew the consequences. She knew that if she was discovered to be pregnant while being engaged, but not married, to Joseph that the law said she was to be stoned to death. She knew that if she could not wrap her mind around being a pregnant virgin, then her family, Joseph, the town, would not understand it either. But something that this angel had said had caught her attention. The child she was carrying would be the son of God. Not a son of God, the son of God. Wasn't this what her people had been waiting for? Isn't this what her very town had been named for. Netzer – a branch or shoot. A new tree would grow from the stump of where another tree had died. Isn't this what the prophets had predicted? That a shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of its roots? She would be carrying the promise of hope within her womb, and that hope was greater than any of the consequences.

Friends, if Mary could say yes to such a great risk at such a young age what are we willing to risk for Christ today? Is there room in our hurried schedules to actually prepare the way of the Lord, or is Advent and this holiday season more about preparing our homes for the holidays then preparing our hearts for the Lord?

What are we willing to risk as we prepare and wait for the Lord this holiday season? Can we make Advent not something that we simply add, but that which we focus our time on the birth of Christ and what that actually means to our lives? Are you in a place in your life where the Lord could speak to you? Where a messenger of the Lord could meet with you, or are you so busy that you wouldn't even notice or have the opportunity to respond as Mary did? Can we offer ourselves to God this season, risking everything for an unrealized and unknown hope? And can we sing Mary's song even in the midst of the risks that we are taking as we prepare and wait. May this season of waiting be filled with blessings for you as you place yourself in the position of Mary to listen and respond to the invitation of the Lord. Amen.