



**The Journey: Mary of Nazareth**

**Luke 1:26-38**

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A pastor was addressing the children during the Christmas service. "Who is the mother of Jesus?" he asked them. Without hesitation, dozens of tiny voices chorused back, "Mary."

"That's right. Now who can tell me who is the father of Jesus?" There was quiet and fidgeting. After all, no one had told them there was going to be a quiz. Then a young girl spoke up. With assurance, she boldly announced: "It's Virg."

There were several seconds of silence. Then she said, "You know, Jesus' parents: Virg an' Mary."

This is the first Sunday of Advent, and we are beginning an all-church study called "The Journey" based on the book of the same title by Adam Hamilton. We have 6 adult classes during the week; the nursery and children are studying the same topic with material geared towards them. This past week, you studied chapter one called Mary of Nazareth, which is our topic today.

An angel appears to Mary, and announces she will bear God's son. Mary of Nazareth. Nazareth, a town of about 100 – 400 people, a town of peasants, perhaps servants of the neighboring big city of Sepphoris, which was filled with the wealthy living in luxury villas.

Why a poor girl from Nazareth? We learned in our classes that Mary's family probably lived in a cave not a villa. Remember one of Jesus' potential disciples on hearing that Jesus was from the village of Nazareth said, "Can anything good

come out of Nazareth?" A town of such low standing that it wasn't listed as one of the towns of Galilee.

Why Mary from no-where Nazareth? What does this tell us about God?

Turn with me to our scripture passage today: Luke 1:26-38.

Prayer: O God, who comes among us and who is still yet to come, as the days grow ever shorter and the nights ever longer, we cling to the promise of the light that is coming into the world. Let every heart here prepare a room for you. Here we are, your servants. Let it be with us according to your word. Amen.

Read Luke 1:26-38

God takes ordinary people and makes them ordinarily sacred.

God took a poor girl from no-where Nazareth and called her favored one. Mary went from ordinary "How can this be?" to extraordinary "Let it be." Let us listen closely to Mary's story because at times we, too, must go from "How can this be?" to "Let it be."

Mary is probably 13 years old and is engaged to Joseph, a relationship arranged by the families. The engagement period lasted a year, they lived apart, and at the end of the year, the relationship is consummated in marriage. It is during this engagement period that Gabriel visits Mary, calls her favored one, and then gives her an amazing task: to carry God's son.

Our passage leaves out a lot of details – at least ones I want to hear. We know her first thought is "How can this be?" But I wonder if racing through her mind is the thought not only of "how can this be," but "I am not married," "I will be shunned," "I will lose Joseph," "My parents will be ashamed." Everything in her life was on the line: her reputation, her marriage, her very life. She could be stoned to death due for getting pregnant out of marriage.

To make it worse, the passage ends with "Then the angel left her." He departs leaving her to deal with the aftermath – the doubts, how to tell her family, Joseph, her community.

This is the special honor God bestows on his favored one? Apparently to be favored does not equate to wealth, health, comfort, ease. Mary's favored status lead her straight to scandal to danger and eventually trauma as she watches her son's crucifixion. It's not a benign thing to be favored by God.

Adam Hamilton says it this way in his book *The Journey*:

“Her mission reminds us that God’s call is sometimes difficult. It may lead us to set aside our own plans. It may mean giving up hopes and dreams we have cherished for a lifetime. It may mean risks. It may be frightening. Sometimes God asks us to be with people we don’t want to be with, to go places we don’t want to, and to do things we don’t want to do. This is part of what Mary’s story teaches us. Mary is twice said to be favored by God, and yet God’s favor meant not a life of bliss, but a life of risk.”

I tremble as I read these lines to you. All day yesterday as I was reworking this message I wanted to take them out because I wanted a positive message this morning. But we can't deny Mary's story. Part of the Christmas story is God asking Mary to do something very difficult.

Has God ever asked you to do something difficult, oh favored one?

In spite of all this, Mary changes her “How can this be?” to “Let it be.” Yes, she struggled with her answer. She had some really good solid reasons to say no. We struggled with this in our classes. Could Mary have said no to the task given her? In the class I was in, many people said no, she had no choice. Yet, the angel waited for her answer. I hope the angel waited patiently for that answer.

Have you ever done anything that you were pretty sure God wanted you to do, but you were afraid in doing it?

One of my greatest fears of becoming a pastor was doing funerals and memorials. I hadn't seen many in my life. I kept thinking how could I be a pastor if I haven't had anyone close to me die? How can I relate to the families who grieve? I gave that excuse for years, and apparently this excuse wasn't acceptable to God because I finally gave in to the call of becoming a pastor.

The funny thing is I now find myself in a retirement community, and memorials is one of the things I do the most. I now consider it an honor to walk beside families as they grieve in this most holiest of times. I share with them of God's love, God's presence, God's peace, God's strength that upholds them in these times. It is one of the most fulfilling things I do.

That which I said at one time, 'How can this be?' has become "Let it be."

What is your "How can this be?" Has it become "Let it be"?

Martin Luther in one of his Christmas sermons said there were three miracles that occurred in Christ's birth: God became human, a virgin conceived and Mary believed. For Luther, the greatest miracle was the third miracle, Mary believed.

She had the audacity to believe that God had chosen her, a no-body in no-where Nazareth to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary didn't say like Moses, "Well, I am not good enough; God, get someone who can talk better." Nor was Mary like Zechariah, "Lord, give me a sign. Prove it to me and then I will believe." Mary simply believed that God chose her. Because she believed, she was able to say yes to what God asked her to do.

Ordinary Mary was "ordinarily sacred." It seems that in her quiet, unremarkable, day-to-day life that Mary "found favor with God." Isn't that what God does? Takes ordinary, everyday things, people, and makes them sacred. Bread and wine and water, ordinary things, become sacraments. A bird represents the Holy Spirit. A cross becomes a sacred symbol of faith.

Us. Ordinary people. Used by God today. It says right there in the passage: with God anything is possible. By the way, did you know The White Queen told Alice in Wonderland that she practiced believing six impossible things every morning before breakfast? What would happen if we did that? That we believed God could use us in impossible ways?

Look around at the people in this congregation. See them as people favored by God and through whom God plans to do marvelous things. God is at work in you and through you, ordinary sacred people. When Mary asked the angel "How?"

the angel said by God's power. It may be hard, but that power paves the way. Nothing is impossible with God.

What is God asking us, an ordinary sacred congregation, to do? It may be hard but God's power paves the way.

The night that Larry, our senior pastor, died, I was at the scene along with several other members of our church and some neighbors. And we cried out, "How can this be?" A pastor from Presbytery, John Cheek, came from Tucson as soon as he heard the news. John works with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and is trained in disaster situations.

As we stood with Larry's family, John suddenly turned to me, looked straight into my eyes and said, "You have been appointed for such a time as this. Everything you have done, your experience, everything has prepared you for this moment, this time."

I nodded my head. My "how can this be" turned to "let it be."

Thus, Paul and I have been given the task to walk by your side these last three months. We have wept with you, laughed with you, listened to you, tried to answer your questions, upheld your faith and helped you walk with God. It has not been easy, at times it seemed impossible, but God's power paved the way. And, it has been an honor, a calling and a blessing to walk with you in this time. I, we are the Lord's servants.

Mary gives us words to respond to the many challenges we face in life. As she said "let it be with me just as you said" she acknowledged she was the Lord's servant. I invite you to respond in such a way with this litany of various situations:

Pastor: Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you and intends to do great things through you.

Congregation: I am the Lord's servant.

Pastor: You found favor through God, and the Holy Spirit will come upon you, guide you, and work through you.

Congregation: I am the Lord's servant.

Pastor: When you get up each day and look upon the day God has given you, it is time to say:

Congregation: I am the Lord's servant.

Pastor: When you stand in a long line at Safeway, you can say with great patience and a smile

Congregation: I am the Lord's servant.

Pastor: When you come out of Safeway and find someone has dented your car, it is time to say,

Congregation: I am the Lord's servant.

Pastor: When you become a caregiver for a loved one, it is time to say,

Congregation: I am the Lord's servant.

Pastor: When a neighbor is lonely, or someone needs a ride to the doctor, you can say

Congregation: I am the Lord's servant.

Pastor: When the food bank needs food, and charities in Green Valley need volunteers and funds, you can say

Congregation: I am the Lord's servant.

Pastor: May this become our mantra as followers of Christ in this church and out in the world. We can say,

Congregation: I am the Lord's servant.

You are ordinarily sacred, favored ones. May your "How can this be" be changed to "Let it be" in your life and in this church for I, you, we are the Lord's servants.

Amen