

Mary of Nazareth Luke 1:26-38

- I. Christmas traditions. We all have them, right? Share one with your neighbor. Does anyone have a strange Christmas tradition? Here are a few from around the world. In a city in South Africa they celebrate the big day by eating deep fried caterpillars. In Catalonia they place a figurine of a man relieving himself in the nativity scene. Now going from the disgusting to the darker side.... In Norway they hide all brooms on Christmas Eve to prevent witches and evil spirits from stealing them. In Austria the parents warn their children as they go to bed on Christmas Eve to be on the lookout not only for Santa but Krampus, a Christmas “devil” that supposedly beats naughty children with branches. And finally, a tradition that is just weird. In Germany parents hide a pickle in the Christmas tree and whoever finds it first gets a prize. In Caracas everyone goes to mass. Not strange you say? Yes. But they travel by roller skate. So that places it squarely in the strange category. In my family growing up, our tradition was not to go to some quaint tree farm in the mountains to get our tree but rather go to the corner lot that advertised the cheapest Christmas trees in town starting at \$9. You can imagine what the \$9 dollar tree looked like, right? A Charlie Brown special. My dad always threatened to get one but we always talked him down. But it did make me wonder, why did Charlie Brown always pick such a lame tree...the one with only one threadbare branch holding a single ornament (**image**)? Was it simply for the laughs or was Charles Shultz, the creator of Charlie Brown, trying to say something? I want us to consider this as we continue our series, “They didn’t see it coming,” as we focus on Mary, the mother of Jesus. Read Scripture **Luke 1:26-38 NIV**

- II. The Christmas story begins in the village of Nazareth. Nazareth now has a population somewhere around 60,000 in the metro area and around 200,000 in the suburbs (**image**). Compare that to Winston-Salem, which is around 230,000. It is a relatively small city, but still a city. But not 2000 years ago. In fact, if you were in geography class and your teacher asked you to find it, you couldn’t because it wasn’t on the map. Most historians of the day such as Josephus didn’t even mention it when he described the area. Most people, unless they were from there, didn’t even know it existed. It was the Booger Swamp (a real place in Yadkinville) of Israel. As a commentator points out, the name of the village “Nazareth” is somewhat prophetic. Follow me on this. In the Old Testament the biblical pattern would have been the following. Israelites obeyed God, life is good. Israelites started worshiping other gods. God warns Israelites. Israelites ignore God. God smites the Israelites. Smiting usually involved allowing an invader like the Babylonians or Assyrians to destroy them or carry them away in captivity. Israelites return to God and all is good again...until the pattern resumes. But there was always a remnant or shoot, the word *netzer* in Hebrew, that survives after the smiting. When I say “shoot” not like gun but like a shoot or branch of a tree. Like after hurricane Matthew on the coast and the trees were destroyed. If we go there next year we will see a new growth coming out of the seemingly dead. (**image**) That is where the word Nazareth comes from. It’s a word of hope that reminds people that God is always doing a new thing...even in the midst of death and destruction. How fitting of a

name for this bump in the road village. Little did they know that the ultimate source of hope for all times for all people would call this Nazareth home.

III. Now like I said, very few would have been familiar with Nazareth in the first century, but the city everyone would have been familiar with was Sepphoris (**image**)...which was about a 5 mile walk from Nazareth. That was the big town. It was known for its culture, its theater, Dollar Tree, along with its educated and wealthy citizens, many who lived in expensive mosaic-tiled Roman villas. (**image**) Contrast this with Nazareth which had a population of somewhere between 100-400, most of whom lived in caves...the cheapest housing you could get in the Middle East. It was like when I lived in Goucher, South Carolina. Goucher was in the suburbs of Gaffney, not exactly a culture hub itself. The only store in Goucher was a rather frightening looking country store called Buds Place. If you wanted to do anything in Goucher, from shop, see a movie, eat, almost anything other than cow tipping, you had to go to Spartanburg about 20 minutes away. And that is the way it was for the Nazarenes. This led Nathaniel, one of the original twelve disciples to say, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" when he heard of Jesus' origins. But this tiny village in the middle of nowhere is where our story begins. And I think we can honestly say that no one, including the Nazarenes themselves, saw this coming...that the future King of Kings would be born in their one-stoplight village. What does this say about the character of God? The fact that He chose to begin the greatest redemption mission in history in the least and last of all places? The fact that He picked poor backwater Nazareth over the more cultured and wealthy Sepphoris to redeem the world? Are you getting an idea why Charlie picked that lame tree? As we consider that question, let's move on to the star of the story...at least the first chapter...to Mary.

IV. Most of us probably have heard that Mary was young when our story begins. Most believe 13-16 years old. (**image**) It was very common for girls to be engaged or betrothed or even married at this age. Our postmodern response is "She is just a child!" But the whole notion of childhood is a fairly recent development. She would have been a very mature 13-year-old. We must take into consideration that the average life span was between 35-40 years old. I remember what I was like when I was thirteen and the thought of me being a father at that age is so frightening on so many levels. It is likely that Mary's parents worked at Sepphoris as servants for a wealthy household. We are fairly certain that she grew up in a cave. In fact there is now a church built on the site of the cave where they believe she lived... the Basilica of the Annunciation. If you were to visit Nazareth you can walk down several layers of earth to get to the original home-site. (**image**) Not exactly a McMansion- but it was at least semi-dry but probably always drafty. One of the ways they would warm themselves would be to pull the livestock in with them. Good thing they didn't have shag carpet. Now depending on who you ask, the Roman Catholics or the Greek Orthodox, the angel in our Scripture either visited Mary in her home, the cave, or at the only spring in the village...which also now has a church built on top of it. Either way, we usually think that the appearance of the angel really frightened Mary. But some argue that is not what the

Scripture really says. It tells us she was perplexed but not necessarily terrified. Why? The word angel literally means “messenger.” Some believe that Gabriel, at least in this visit, didn’t look that much out of the ordinary. Kind of like the 80’s show “Highway to Heaven” or the 90’s “Touched by an Angel,” he might have looked like your average Joe sans wings. Now his appearance may or may not have frightened Mary, but I am sure his news did.

- V. He begins his message with these words, “Greetings favored one.” This means literally “full of grace”. What does he mean by this? Our Catholic brothers and sisters have taken this to mean that Mary was sinless. But Protestants have interpreted this differently. Grace is used in the New Testament hundreds of times...but usually means God’s love, His compassion, His work on our behalf, and all these things given undeserved. Mary being selected to give birth to the savior of the world was an act of pure grace...she was chosen and favored not because of anything she did or didn’t do, but rather because of who God is. It was like when I was a middle schooler in P.E. When people were picking teams for kick ball and they chose me, it definitely wasn’t because of my mad kick ball skills! It was because of the captain’s grace or more likely ignorance. And I believe Mary was chosen because of God’s undeserved favor...a running theme throughout the life and ministry of Jesus. This Jesus who hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors and who picked some colorful characters to be His disciples...a thief, a radical, and some salty fishermen. Then Gabriel spills the rest of the beans. She is going to be the mother of Son of the Most High...the Son of God Himself. Now it was common to be called children of God...as this is how the Jews understood their special relationship with the Lord. But they always used “a child of God” not “the son of God.” One is in the general sense the other the unique. See the difference? Gabriel goes on to tell her that her son’s name will be Jesus which means “he saves.” Most appropriate. He goes on to describe how He will be the King, King eternal Unlike David, the Israelites’ greatest king up until now, His kingdom will never end.
- VI. Now the gravity of what the angel is saying begins to hit...and this is why Gabriel told her not to be frightened first. It is kind of like calling someone after you have been in accident. What should you say? “I am okay but I wanted to let you know the car is totaled.” In this case the news is good, unbelievable and even mind blowing but there is a shadow side for Mary. Put yourself in her shoes for a moment. Thirteen years old. Poor. Living in a leaky cave in the middle of nowhere. **(image)** Her only prospect for a better life, or at least an easier life, is through marriage. Now this messenger from God tells her that she is going to be pregnant...divinely, but out of wedlock, at least in the eyes of the world. All her dreams, her hopes for an easier life, would be dashed. The punishment for adultery, which this would have been considered, is death. At the very least, her engagement with Joseph would end in shame and she would be banished by her family. Her very life and future is at stake. It is hanging by a thread. Does she trust this messenger? Trust this God? Why must the Messiah, the Savior, come now, after all this time? Why this place? Nazareth, really? And why her? Why not one of those wealthy girls living over in Sepphorias? I wonder if Mary paused just for a moment and reflected on all the stories she heard as a child...about

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Moses and his wife...all unlikely heroes themselves. Even the great King David, the runt of his family...whose own father didn't even think he was up for the task. None of them saw it coming. Perhaps it hit Mary all of the sudden, like a V8 moment. This is how God always works... **He chooses the nobodies not the somebodies to do His greatest works for everybody.** And so despite her fear of her future, the probable loss of her fiancé and possibly even her life, she says these few words that change the course of history... "Here I am. Your servant...(and borrowing a line from *The Princess Bride*) according to the Ron Garner translation, "As you wish." And the greatest story of all time begins...because a young frightened girl in a small out of the way village says "yes" to God.

- VII. I want to close our time this morning with these two thoughts. First, I think we need to rid ourselves of the notion when we say "yes" to God and His will for our life that things are all of a sudden going to get easy. In fact, I would say that often the opposite is true. Mary's life was anything but easy. From the manger to the cross, Mary's life was punctuated with unbelievable joy but paired with untold grief and hardship. If she knew what she was going to go through in the coming years, would she still have said "yes" to Gabriel? If she knew that she would have to watch her son die a horrific death on the cross would she still say "as you wish?" I think so but perhaps she would have paused just a little longer. Saying "yes" to God's will for our life doesn't promise a bed of roses. It reminds me of the story of Father Boyle. **(image)** Father Boyle as a young priest was assigned to Dolores Mission Church in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East LA in 1986. This was ground zero for gang violence. In fact 8 rival gangs claimed the Boyle Heights as their turf. There was a shooting almost every night. The situation seemed completely hopeless. And Father Boyle was about the least likely guy to connect to gang bangers. He was as white as me, scrawny, bookish and most importantly not inked. He was as unlikely to minister to that neighborhood as a young impoverished Mary was to give birth to the Messiah. But like Mary, like millions before him and millions after, Father Boyle said to God, "As you wish." Now 30 years later there are multiple businesses providing jobs for hundreds of ex-gang members, a school, drug treatment ministry, free counseling, free medical, and dozens of other services. Thousands of gang members found their way because one scrawny scared priest said "yes" to God. And Father Boyle will be the first to tell us it was anything but easy. Fulfilling in the deepest sense? Yes. Easy? Absolutely not!
- VIII. And second, we come back to Charlie and his tree. This is where we began. Why do you think Charlie Brown, or better yet Charles Shultz, had Charlie pick the lamest, saddest tree in the lot to celebrate Christmas, the greatest of all days? I believe that it was intentional and far more than just for a cheap laugh. I believe Charles, a Christ follower, was making a powerful statement about the essence of the Christmas story...that God chose to bring about the salvation of humankind through the most unlikely of persons, in a most unlikely place, in a most unlikely way. And maybe Charlie Brown, by picking the most pathetic tree to celebrate the greatest of moments, was reminding us of this eternal truth. God most often works through the most unexpected, the least and those on the edges to complete His

will. If he can use a poor teenaged girl living on the margins, use a gangly bookish priest, then just maybe He can use me and maybe He can use you too. Mary never saw it coming. And when God uses us, we won't either.