

Braving the Wilderness: 3. Accept the Promise

Luke 1:26-38

December 16, 2018

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Did anyone go out to buy a live Christmas tree? What do you look for in a tree? When our children were little, this was always the beginning of our preparation for Christmas. We would get all bundled up and drive to the nearest Christmas tree lot to look for the perfect tree. Are there any perfect trees? Each year, I was determined to find it – it had to be the right height and look the same on all sides and have needles that were just the right length. It wasn't enough to find the best tree in one Christmas tree lot. I wanted to compare that tree with what we could find in other lots. And to my families increasing weariness and frustration, I was willing to check every Christmas tree lot in the south metro area if that's what it took to find the perfect tree. I was on a mission! But then one year, I asked who would like to go tree shopping with me and no one wanted to go. That's the year we bought an artificial tree. I look back on that time and wonder what it would have been like if I took on the Christmas tree search like Charlie Brown did.

Have you ever watched A Charlie Brown Christmas? Charlie Brown was sent by Lucy with the instruction to buy the best tree he could find for the school pageant. And this is what happens: [video] I never had the courage to bring home a Charlie Brown tree, but from our scripture this morning, I think that tree, Charlie Brown's tree is a metaphor for what God does. What was God thinking?

We are told that **God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee**, Nazareth was the last place one would expect God to send an angel. Nazareth was not listed on any of the maps of first century Israel. 17 miles from the Mediterranean Sea and 15 miles from the Sea of Galilee. It was in the middle of nowhere. Maybe 100 people lived there. There were no roads to Nazareth, and archeologists have determined the housing was most likely caves cut into the rocky hillside. A few years ago, archeologists found what they think was the home of Jesus. How would they know it was where Jesus lived? In the second century a church was built on top of this cave – and of all the homes in Nazareth, why might this be the one on which they would build a church? So they think this was where Jesus lived. It was a cave cut into the hillside. The people who lived in Nazareth were the poorest of the poor. Just northwest of Nazareth was the town of Sepphoris. It was a city of 30,000 and considered the “jewel of Galilee.” Sepphoris was on a major trade route, filled with luxury villas, a theater that seated 9,000, a marketplace where one could buy anything. The wealthy and powerful lived in Sepphoris. The nobodies lived in Nazareth. They were likely the servants for those who lived in Sepphoris. Why would God go to Nazareth and not Sepphoris to find a woman who would hold the most important role in human history? In fact, in John's gospel after Jesus called Peter and Andrew to be his disciples, Andrew invited Nathaniel to meet Jesus and when he learns Jesus is from Nazareth, he says, **Can anything from Nazareth be good?** And yet God turned to Nazareth. The one that everyone else would reject is the one that God lifts up.

Mary was a little like the tree that Charlie Brown picked. **God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary.** We learn that Mary was engaged, but not yet married. She was likely 12 or 13 years old. Because most women in the first century did not live beyond their 30s, as soon as they reached puberty, they were married and having children. But Mary is not married yet and she knows enough to know that if she is pregnant, the man to whom she is engaged is not the father. And if she was truly pregnant, she

knew the implication. This could destroy everything. The book of Deuteronomy called for the death of someone who has sexual relations outside of marriage. This word, this message from Gabriel is a death sentence for Mary. **The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you.”** That may be well-enough for the angel to say. Mary may know that God is with her, but I don’t think there was joy in this message, at least not yet.

Have you ever been in a place in your life where you received a hard message? One you did not expect and did not want and could not control? In this Advent series, we have focused in on the wildernesses of life. Using the definition that Brene Brown provides in her book, *Braving the Wilderness*, we’ve used wilderness as a metaphor for places of vulnerability that we can’t control. Maybe we did something to get into the wilderness but it was not because we were seeking a place of vulnerability. Sometimes it is the circumstances of life – an illness that we cannot prevent or an accident or an event that we did not see coming or a habit that has taken control of us. Or maybe you made a change for what you thought were all the right reasons and suddenly you find yourselves in the wilderness. Mary didn’t sign up for this. She wasn’t asking for this message from God. It’s not as if she prayed every night that she would be the mother of the Messiah or even in some miraculous way she might experience an immaculate conception.

So what does Mary do? Luke tells us: **Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands.** Mary leaves Nazareth. There is no indication that she speaks to her parents or to Joseph, but she makes her way south to the hill country Judea – an eight day journey. We don’t know what happened for those eight days – eight days alone in the wilderness – with this unexpected news that must have been hard to comprehend (for 2000 years, theologians have tried to make sense of what the angel announced). What do you do when you can’t control where you are or the path before you?

Last week, as I thought about Mary’s eight day journey, it occurred to me that it might be similar to what someone experiences as they face major surgery. You get to a point where you have tried everything that can be tried and you can’t fix yourself, so you place your life in a surgeon’s hands – literally, you give up your life. I’ve been with a lot of people in the minutes before surgery. These can be anxious moments. You’ve done your homework, investigated the procedure, studied the odds. You get to a point where all you can do is trust. And it’s not just trusting a surgeon – it’s a whole system and the wisdom that has been gained through the ages. And I believe the author and giver of life is not sitting at a distance and waiting for whatever will be. God is right there in the midst of what is happening. God has invested himself in human life. And here’s where I believe the power of prayer can make all the difference. When we invite God in – when we accept God’s promise – when we internalize Emmanuel (God with us) – our mental, emotional, physical, spiritual selves are in sync with the Creator of the Universe – even the impossible can be possible. Remember, Jesus would have his own moment on that final night in the Garden of Gethsemane when circumstance beyond his control had conspired to take his life – he let go and accepted the promise of a God who will never let go.

At the end of her eight day journey, Mary arrives at the home of Zechariah to speak with Elizabeth who is her elderly aunt or cousin (the relationship is not clear), and when Mary walks into the room, Elizabeth who is six months pregnant, too old to have a child but has miraculously conceived a child – Mary enters the house and immediately the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy. And Elizabeth knows in her heart that not only is Mary pregnant, but Mary’s child is the Messiah. Mary hasn’t said a word, but God has prepared the way. Mary is in the presence of someone who has experienced for herself the miraculous work of God – Elizabeth knows the Promise of God and can see that God has not left Mary alone. Elizabeth cries out with words that those who grew up Catholic know well. *“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with*

you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” It is then that Mary feels the joy, and she shares the words of a song – a song that I think she learned in the wilderness, in that eight day journey of being alone and unsure of what would be.

With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! For now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Mary was like the little tree that Charlie Brown picked. Throughout scripture, that’s what God does. When God chooses to create a nation, God selects an old couple who could not have children. When God chooses a people, God picks slaves in Egypt, and when God chooses someone to deliver the slaves in Egypt, God chooses a stuttering, 80 year old goat herder in the wilderness. When God looks for a great king to lead Israel, God sends Samuel to the home of Jesse to select a son – and Samuel and Jesse think it must be the oldest, the smartest, the best looking – but God selects the youngest that no one thought would amount to anything. God looks to the heart – and not outward appearances. This is the God who: **has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.**

When you watch a football game and you don’t know either team, which one do you root for? I find myself rooting for the underdog. We were created in the image of God and inside there is something pulling for the one least expected. Charlie Brown picks the tree no one wants. He says, “It needs me.” This is the heart of God and when we let God enter in, that becomes our heart as well. Mary is rejoicing, not because she is having a baby, she hasn’t told anyone yet. She is rejoicing because God has chosen her.

How do we find lasting joy? Is it getting our way all the time? Is it finding everything we want under the tree? Joy comes to those who in the midst of struggles, think less of themselves and more of other people – lifting others up, trusting God will supply our needs. Accepting the promise. On Christmas Eve, we will take an offering and give the entire offering to the lowly. Let me tell you about the destination of this offering. Half will go to provide scholarships so that families unable to afford child care will have a safe and loving place where their children can grow into the potential that God has given them. I think of a mom and two little girls who can’t bloom. The youngest was 3 years old at the time and for the first two months that she was here she was non-verbal. Her mom had just relocated to this area after leaving an abusive relationship. When she toured the Center, she asked, “How many times do you beat the children?” You see, desperate to find someone to care for her children, she had been forced to leave her children with persons who turned out to be beating them. But in the years that followed, this mom and her two daughters experienced what love looks like. They experienced trust and built relationships. The 3 year old reached a point where she became the unofficial Bloom greeter. She knew every child and would greet all the children. She also achieved every milestone and entered kindergarten ready to thrive. A child that the rest of the world might overlook became a child that you have lifted up.

Mary says God lifts the lowly. That happens when an angel appears. Angels come in many forms. If you are looking, you can find one here.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 16, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Dear God, at the height of our Advent journey, grant us the courage to brave the wilderness and find the joy so that your light might shine once again even in the face of apathy, sorrow, and uncertainty. Amen.

Monday, December 17

Scripture: Psalm 126:1-6

When the LORD changed Zion's circumstances for the better, it was like we had been dreaming. Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter; our tongues were filled with joyful shouts. It was even said, at that time, among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them!" Yes, the LORD has done great things for us, and we are overjoyed. LORD, change our circumstances for the better, like dry streams in the desert waste! Let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with joyful shouts. Let those who go out, crying and carrying their seed, come home with joyful shouts, carrying bales of grain!

Observation: Israel's long history included incredibly low times of misery at the hands of tyrants (notably slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon). But it also included God's action to deliver them in the Exodus and in the return from exile. Psalm 126 poetically recalled the joy of the times when God lifted them up from their lowly status, and prayed that God would again allow them to live in the joy of God's deliverance.

Application: The first half of this psalm was a journey in memory. The Israelites never forgot the Exodus from Egypt as their defining story – nor the jubilation of being set free from exile. "Yes, the Lord has done great things for us," the psalmist affirmed. God lifting them up from their lowly status was a permanent part of their history. What do you remember as a time when God did "great things" in your life? How do you keep that memory alive? In what ways can this Advent season nourish your confidence that even in the wildernesses of life, God can do great things for us?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the times—like Christmas—when you did great things for your people. Help me to live in the confidence that, sooner or later, you always act to lift up and bring joy to the lowly. Amen.

Tuesday, December 18

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom." Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?" The angel replied, "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. 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. Nothing is impossible for God." Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Observation: Mary was a poor teenager in the obscure town of Nazareth. She had no reason to expect to lead an exceptional life. So when God's angel said, "Rejoice, favored one! God is honoring you," Luke said the words confused her. But with eyes that saw things human eyes

could not, God chose her to become the mother who would miraculously bear the Messiah all Israel was waiting for.

Application: People in Mary's day understood the basic human reproduction process as well (or as poorly!) as we do. A virgin could NOT be pregnant. Yet Gabriel promised exactly that (verse 31). Of course Mary was confused and puzzled at first. She didn't try to hide her questions (verse 34), but she did listen trustingly to the angel's answer. What doubts or struggles do you face today? Be open about them. Make them a subject to talk about honestly with God in prayer, and perhaps also with a pastor or other trusted person.

Prayer: Lord of all, many things I wish for are impossible on a human scale. Teach me how to trust your eternal power, which operates on an eternal scale and makes even the impossible possible. Amen.

Wednesday, December 19

Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

Observation: In Mary's culture, women were second-class citizens. No male leader of her day (let alone an angel) would have greeted this woman of almost no status by calling her "favored one." When Mary sang that God lifts up the lowly, she did so as a living example of that. No wonder she exulted in God's inversion of human values: "He has pulled the powerful down... and lifted up the lowly." God valued who she really was, no matter her social status!

Application: Mary began her song with words of gratitude and praise: "With all my heart I glorify the Lord." As we move through this season remembering the promises that were a part of the Christmas event, who or what in your life are you thankful for? Which of the promises of Christmas lead you to glorify the Lord with all your heart? How willing are you to use your God-given ability to lift the burdens of those who are lowly in parts of life where you are strong?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when Mary grasped that you would be her child, she celebrated with a song of gratitude. Help me to truly celebrate you this Advent season, to glorify you with all my heart. Amen.

Thursday, December 20

Scripture: Isaiah 7:1-4, 10-16; Matthew 1:18-24

In the days of Ahaz (Jotham's son and grandson of Judah's King Uzziah), Aram's King Rezin and Israel's King Pekah (Remaliah's son) came up to attack Jerusalem, but they couldn't overpower it. When the house of David was told that Aram had become allies with Ephraim, their hearts and the hearts of their people shook as the trees of a forest shake when there is a wind. But the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at

the end of the channel of the Upper Pool, by the road to the field where laundry is washed, and say to him, 'Be careful and stay calm. Don't fear, and don't lose heart over these two pieces of smoking torches, over the burning anger of Rezin, Aram, and Remaliah's son.

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: "Ask a sign from the LORD your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I won't ask; I won't test the LORD." Then Isaiah said, "Listen, house of David! Isn't it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us.") When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife.

Observation: Three kings were plotting to attack Judah, and King Ahaz was frightened. The prophet Isaiah told the king that, as a sign from God, a young woman (possibly Isaiah's wife) would give birth to a son. Before the boy reached *bar mitzvah* age (age 13), the plotting kingdoms would lose their power (and they did). Centuries later, Matthew recognized that Jesus was the ultimate Immanuel ("God with us") sign.

Application: Matthew 18:20 quoted the adult Jesus as saying, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them." And the gospel's final verse, Matthew 28:20, carried the promise that "I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." What settings or practices help to make God's presence real to you? What makes it important for you (and each one of us) to trust "Immanuel"—God with us—especially when moving through life's wildernesses?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, during Advent I remember that when you came into our world, you were human, but you were also more. Give me insight and humility as I internalize the mystery that you were Immanuel, "God with us." Amen.

Friday, December 21

Scripture: Luke 13:10-17

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. A woman was there who had been disabled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and couldn't stand up straight. When he saw her, Jesus called her to him and said, "Woman, you are set free from your sickness." He placed his hands on her and she straightened up at once and praised God. The synagogue leader, incensed that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, responded, "There are six days during which work is permitted. Come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath day." The Lord replied, "Hypocrites! Don't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from its stall and lead it out to get a drink? Then isn't it necessary that this woman, a daughter of

Abraham, bound by Satan for eighteen long years, be set free from her bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he said these things, all his opponents were put to shame, but all those in the crowd rejoiced at all the extraordinary things he was doing.

Observation: Few people in Jesus' day could have been lowlier than this woman, crippled for 18 years. On top of the low social and legal status of women in general, and the limitations of her physical disability, most Hebrews at that time understood physical problems to be a sign of God's displeasure. When Jesus decisively set her free, he lifted a huge burden from her. No wonder Luke recorded that people "rejoiced at all the extraordinary things he was doing."

Application: Use your imagination to try to feel the freedom and almost disbelieving joy the woman must have had when she was able to stand upright for the first time in 18 years! Has God ever worked, either directly or through a human agent, to free you from something that had bound you for a long time? Has God ever given you the privilege of being part of the process of freeing someone else from a long-standing burden?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your healing, freeing work brought joy, and often met opposition. Give me the wisdom to stay attuned to the ways you choose to work, even if that stretches my comfort zone. Amen.

Saturday, December 22

Scripture: Romans 14:13-18; James 2:5-9

So stop judging each other. Instead, this is what you should decide: never put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way of your brother or sister. I know and I'm convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is wrong to eat in itself. But if someone thinks something is wrong to eat, it becomes wrong for that person. If your brother or sister is upset by your food, you are no longer walking in love. Don't let your food destroy someone for whom Christ died. And don't let something you consider to be good be criticized as wrong. God's kingdom isn't about eating food and drinking but about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever serves Christ this way pleases God and gets human approval.

My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn't God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn't God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Don't the wealthy make life difficult for you? Aren't they the ones who drag you into court? Aren't they the ones who insult the good name spoken over you at your baptism? You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself. But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker.

Observation: Paul wrote to Roman Christians about disputes over proper religious practice, urging "the strong" to care about and encourage "the weak," rather than mocking or discouraging them. James wrote about the all-too-human tendency to show favoritism to wealthy people over the poor, even in a relatively small matter like whom you seat where in church. Both apostles were convinced that life in God's Kingdom is about "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." Advent is about joy—not just the joy of decorations and presents, but the joy of joining in God's work of lifting up the lowly.

Application: Paul wrote that when Christians focus their spiritual walk on "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit," they are able to stop sniping at one another. James underscored that, in the words of scholar William Barclay, "there can be no distinctions of rank

and prestige when [people] meet in the presence of the King of glory.” How easy or hard do you find it to lay aside a value system built on status, title or wealth to live a life devoted to lifting up the lowly, and finding joy in that kind of life? What helps you see whatever riches you have (in time, talent or money) as gifts meant to bless others, not just to cling to for your own sake?

Prayer: Lord, remind me that “this is my father’s world;” that I am a steward of some of your world rather than the owner of any of it. Help me to find your joy as I keep my values aligned with yours. Amen.