

“The Annunciation to Mary”

Luke 1:26-38

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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We are going to go back to Nazareth today. I showed you some pictures from Nazareth earlier this year, but there were some things I intentionally did not show you then. I wanted to wait till now. I wanted to wait ... till Advent.

“In the sixth month” – that is, the sixth month since Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, conceived the child who would become John the Baptist – “the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth.” Luke’s gospel is very clear about where this momentous event took place – the announcement of the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary that she would conceive in her womb and bear a son – the very Son of God. This announcement – this “annunciation” (that’s the fancy term for it) – took place in a town in Galilee called Nazareth. It is the same Nazareth that exists today, the same Nazareth that I visited back in January. Today it is a city of some 77,000 people. Back then it was much smaller – an insignificant little village, never mentioned in the Old Testament or in any other historical sources prior to the New Testament. It became famous *solely* because of the fact that Gabriel came here and that Jesus was raised here.

Pause and ponder that for just a moment. Mary was a young peasant girl living in an insignificant village. God could have found *any young woman anywhere in the world* to be the mother of our Savior. He could have chosen a young, poor woman living in Jerusalem. He could have chosen a young, wealthy woman living in Ephesus, or Alexandria, or Rome – one of the great cities of the Roman Empire. God chose *Nazareth*. A place most everybody had *never heard of*. Why? Because the Savior didn’t come to just help the *rich*. Didn’t come to just help the *powerful*. Didn’t come to just help the *elite aristocrats*. The Savior came to help *everybody*. Even those people living in tiny little towns that most everybody has never heard of. There is *no one* who is insignificant in God’s eyes. *No one* who does not merit God’s attention, God’s favor, God’s love.

Most of us are familiar with the story. Mary is engaged to a man named Joseph, who is descended from King David. Not that that matters much; there ain’t no Jew who was going to become King; not while the Romans were in charge. Mary wasn’t going to have a royal wedding. This was just a simple engagement – a young peasant girl, and a young man, presumably a bit older than she was. Did they love each other? Had the marriage been arranged? Was it a marriage of convenience for the two families? We really have no idea. All we know is that she was young – according to tradition, she was

only 14 years old – and that they had not yet made love. Suddenly, lo and behold, there stands an angel of the Lord in front of this young woman – the archangel Gabriel, no less. If Mary was familiar with the stories of Daniel in the Old Testament, then she would have heard about Gabriel, for he shows up in that book. But what was an angel doing *here*? In *Nazareth*, of all places? Visiting *her*, of all people? You know the answer: God had sent him to tell her that she would be the mother of God’s own Son.

Now if you go to Nazareth today, you can visit this magnificent building: the Basilica of the Annunciation. This is an extremely large Catholic church – it is actually the largest Christian sanctuary anywhere in the Middle East. It is a very modern building, completed just 50 years ago, and it was built on the site of at least three previous churches. The first church that was built here – in the fourth century – was constructed on the site of a shrine which contained the remains of what Christians believed was the original childhood home of Mary. When you enter the Basilica today, you can descend to a Grotto on the lower level. There you will find pillars and other stone work from the church that was built on that site a thousand years ago, and even some remains from the church that was built six hundred years before that. There is even some graffiti down there – 17-century old graffiti! – that indicates this was a place where Christians were baptized. Immediately outside the church is an area where excavations have uncovered ancient homes; there is one house just across that street that, without a doubt, dates back to the first century. Tradition says that Mary’s house was *here*, on the site where this church now stands. That could very well be the case. Was *this* where Gabriel appeared to Mary? Catholic tradition says yes, yes it was.

Greek Orthodox Christians say differently. This is the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, just a stone’s throw away from the Catholic Basilica of the Annunciation. This church, like its Catholic counterpart, stands on a site where several previous churches dating back to the fourth century once stood. Under this church there is an underground spring ... and there is an early Christian legend that says that Mary was drawing water from a well when she was visited by the angel Gabriel. Here is a fresco from inside this church, depicting that event; note the water, and her jar.

Adjacent to the Greek Orthodox Church is a well – Mary’s Well. Water flows from the spring that under the church to this sacred spot. This current structure does not provide water; it is here purely for symbolic purposes; it was built 19 years ago to commemorate the well that used to exist here, the place where – for *centuries* – villagers would come to draw water. Here is a postcard from about a century ago depicting Mary’s Well when it was in use; and here is an artist’s depiction of what the well might have looked like in the first century. Imagine a young fourteen-year-old girl coming here with her jar to draw water for her family. And imagine an angel of the Lord appearing to her, *right here*.

Now I have no idea whether the Catholics are right or the Orthodox are right. Did Gabriel appear to Mary at her home, or at the well? Luke is our best source; he says it happened in Nazareth, but he does not give specifics. Does it really matter? The point is – *it happened*. Here. In Nazareth.

That event was of such significance in the history of the church, in the history of the *world*, that we have these two grand churches commemorating that event ... and, of course, a multitude of artistic representations of that event, through the centuries. Here is how Leonardo da Vinci depicted that

scene. This, art historians think, was probably Leonardo's first complete work. This event, the Annunciation of Mary, was of such great significance to him, that it is essentially what he painted *first*.

But what, indeed, is so significant about this event? It is one of a large multitude of Bible stories that have been turned into art; one of hundreds upon hundreds of holy sites you can visit in the Holy Land. What's so special about the Annunciation? What's so sacred about what happened *here*?

Let's take another look at that fresco from the Greek Orthodox Church. Here is Gabriel; here is Mary; notice that there are six lines of text at the bottom, each in a different language. The bottom line is in English: "Hail, thou art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women." That's a portion of what Gabriel says to Mary; those are actually the *first* words he says to her, according to Luke. Notice the emphases he places on *her*: *YOU* are highly favored; the Lord is with *YOU*; blessed are *YOU* among women. *God has chosen Mary to bear God's Son*. Of all the countless women God could have chosen, God chose *her*. She is *favoured*; she is *blessed*; God is *with her*, in a uniquely special way that no one else in the history of humanity *ever* gets to experience. Some Christian traditions place a strong emphasis on Mary; here is one reason why. The "Hail Mary" prayer that Catholics pray is based in large part on these words that Gabriel says to Mary, and the words that Mary's cousin Elizabeth says to her a little bit later on. We don't have to be Catholic to appreciate the fact that God chose *this* young woman to bear his Son. Maybe she deserves more attention than what we Protestants tend to give her.

But more than that: what the Annunciation points to is the reality that *God loved us so much that he chose to come HERE*. To be *with us*. To be *one of us*. To become *fully human*. The divinity of God takes human form in Mary's womb. God's very *presence* came to this earth. God is not just some far-off deity, majestic in the heavens, invisible to human eyes. God is also a flesh-and-blood human, who was lovingly cared for by a human mother, who carried him inside her womb for nine months, and gave him birth. God did not just *visit* us. God *became one of us*! He was born, he nursed, he grew, he played, he lost his baby teeth, he went through puberty, he learned a trade, he became a man, he experienced temptation – he lived a *fully human life* ... except without sin. We have a God who knows *full well* what it means to be human ... because he *was* human. He *knows* what it is like to live on this earth, to live in these bodies. He *knows* all the things that ail us, that trouble us, that tempt us. God *gets it*. God *understands*.

So when we pray to God, we are not praying to some kind of remote deity, a far-off God who has no clue what we are going through. No ... we are praying to a God who *knows what it's like to live this life*. To be *human*. Whatever you are facing – whatever struggles you are dealing with – whatever trials you may be going through – you can pray to a God who *understands*. A God who *gets it*.

I have one last picture I want to show you today: nighttime over Nazareth, one particular night of the year. Yes, those are fireworks. No, it's not the Fourth of July. That is Israel, not the United States; they don't celebrate the Fourth of July. Those aren't Independence Day fireworks. Those are *Christmas Eve* fireworks. On December 24, *fireworks* are in the skies over Nazareth! Because *God came*. God came there; God came *here*, to *this* earth. Annunciation, Incarnation ... *Emmanuel*.

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