

The Geography of Hope: Nazareth
Luke 1:26-38
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First Christian Church
Omaha, Nebraska
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Like many little children, Sarah and her brother Zachary gather with their mom before bed to say their prayers together. They innocently, yet wisely go through the litany of being thankful for every family member, friend, toy, and sometimes even the occasional tree in the back yard or neighborhood dog. When Sarah was about 4 she started adding to this list, but also made a slight addendum to the ending to her prayers. At the close of her prayer she would say, “and thanks for all the girls, too.” The first night her mom smiled slightly, thinking she was raising a very confident, empowered little girl. As this practice continued, however, Sarah’s mom became a little curious.

Finally, one night, after Sarah again closed her prayer with “and thanks for the little girls, too,” as her mom was tucking her into to bed she asked. “Sarah honey, why do you always include the part about all the girls in your prayers?” Thinking she would get a response about Sarah being thankful for her female playmates, Sarah’s response caused her mom to stop and wonder about how her daughter hears and understands things. As Sarah sleepily snuggled under the blankets, she quietly said “we always finish our prayers with All Men, and I just thought God wanted to hear about the girls, too.”

While I do not think Sarah’s comment caused her mother to sit back, confused and seriously ponder in the same way we’re told Mary did in response to the angel Gabriel’s greeting, I do think perhaps Sarah’s play on these words displays how we are to hear differently, or anew this hopeful story. According to Luke’s gospel, this passage known as the annunciation, Gabriel enters the room and stating, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you,” announces the coming of something truly amazing. But Mary “was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” While Mary might be perplexed, I do not think we are anymore – but we should be!

We hear this story every year, and it becomes a challenge to hear it differently. As Mary sat back and pondered the meaning of this greeting, but also this message, so should we. Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggest that the Christmas story is actually the “entire Christian gospel in miniature. Get it, and you get everything, miss it, and you miss all.”¹ There is so much meaning embedded within the Christmas Narrative that we have chosen to unpack it through our Advent to Epiphany series “The Geography of Christmas.” Each week we will travel to a different location in the Christmas story in order to reveal it’s meaning and our lives. This week we travel to the house of Mary, located

¹ Borg and Crossan *The First Christmas* p. 53

in Nazareth. It is our hope that through this journey we will not only rediscover this story anew, but that we will then realize the Gospel message within our lives; for Gabriel is also greeting us this day. This first day of advent; "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you." And embedded in this greeting is also the message that as the God is with us, God is then going to do something entirely surprising and fantastic with us and our world.

As Sarah's mother's curiosity was piqued, so is our interest raised alongside Mary's upon this intriguing greeting, and the meaning of Gabriel's statement. I certainly hope you often feel God with you, yet finding favor with God is most certainly something that is perplexing. Just last week Rick preached upon humility in the eyes of God. We are not to view ourselves as favored or exalted – rather we are ordinary people, living ordinary lives. God is happening in the most ordinary of places, very much like Nazareth; and with a very ordinary girl, of Mary. The nearness of God is something that is not unique to us, but rather something all people can experience. While this may not be unique, if we look at it through the lens of the Christmas story, we rediscover the Hope that God brings into our ordinary lives. Knowing this, it does not seem strange to us either that today's stop along the Christmas Narrative Map is found deep within the throws of Hope. We know that this entire season is deeply instilled with Hope, but we can sometimes miss it and God, because it does seem so very ordinary and common.

Yet if we really stop and think about it; think about hope in our world today, the state of our economic affairs, or the state of the planet, or worse yet, the state of even humanity within this planet can seem far from hopeful. A painting aptly entitled Hope, by George Frederick Watts illuminates this puzzling statement. At the first glance it is rather strange that such a picture should bear such a title, but the imagery is perfectly true. A single woman sits atop the world. A solitary star illuminates the heavens, and this woman, supposedly representing Hope bends her ear to catch the music from the last remaining string of the almost shattered lyre she holds in her hands. Her eyes are covered with a blindfold and downcast toward the world, upon which she sits. The picture was painted in 1885 and given to the nation in 1897; yet I think it can represent how we're feeling today. As she sits on top of the world, what we would assume is the rightful place of one who is favored by God, she instead sits upon a world filled with pain. She herself does not look hopeful or favored, but rather clinging to the last string of lyrical hope for herself, or for the world.

She, an ordinary woman, sits atop the world of today. Do we dare to claim hope in a time when just last week the number of women brutally raped and tortured in the Congo reached into the millions? Do we claim hope in a time when 6 out of 10 African American children in our very city live in poverty? Do we claim hope when the unemployment in North Omaha is, and has been for a number of years at 35%? Do we dare to claim hope in a season of debated health care to celebrate the birth of children who cannot hope to even have health coverage?

As this painting can suggest we too can blindly turn our eyes to the world, straining to listen to just one last note of resounding hope. This is not our image of hope, nor favor. I'm sure Mary couldn't imagine an early birth, complications in the very beginning of her marriage, as well as the social and family stigma associated with this so-called favor. Yet this is actually where hope is most prevalent and born into our world. This painting, this story reveals the very ordinary lives of people. The world in which we sit is not in fact well put together, we don't all get along, and in fact, there is a tremendous amount of pain and suffering. And that's exactly how hope enters our world. It is how children are brought into our world every day.

The miracle of this birth is immense and we could spend hours unpacking all the various ways to see God's miracle, but the one that I think is of upmost importance is the fact that Gabriel tells Mary, God is coming. Through the birth of this child, not only you, but the whole world will know that God is with us. God has chosen to enter our ordinary and broken world in order to be with us, love us, and show us how we too can in fact love and live in this world. Ponder that! That is most certainly a perplexing greeting and entrance into our world. This painting could in fact be Mary, favored, sitting on top of the world, ready to bring forth hope and the most compassionate love into a world of brokenness and pain.

As people of faith we are like this woman sitting in the very middle of our lives while also turning our ears and minds towards God's unending hope for our world. Theologian Paul Tillich claims there are two orders at work. There is "the human, political, historical order, and the divine, eternal order... the human order, the order of history, is primarily the order of growing and dying. ...Generations after generations grow up, struggle, suffer, enjoy and disappear."² The human order is what we know and where we live most of our days. And this is the stage for God's hope for our world. As this birth narrative is a lens into the larger Gospel hope, Luke's gospel not only reveals this amazing hope of God's birth into our world and lives, but Luke continually reveals that God happens in the most ordinary of ways. God appears to a young, seemingly insignificant girl in a remote part of the Roman Empire to speak greetings of favor and hope for her and the world. We find hope in this location of Nazareth because it's not the central power, or city of prestige. It's not the Paris or New York. Instead, Nazareth is the backcountry, the rural remote parts of the empire; much like our own beloved Nebraska. And Gabriel reveals this is where God works and lives. God may be powerful beyond our understanding; but God works and appears in the most mundane and ordinary ways; that's to say, God appears in our lives. The ordinary is God's extraordinary. The birth of a child, while always a blessing, is not actually uncommon – it happens everyday all over the world. Women's bodies know how to do this – and that's how God works – with our world and us!

God not only happens in the midst of our very human, ordinary order, but through these actions God then brings what Tillich refers to as the eternal and divine order.

² Paul Tillich *The Shaking of the Foundations* p 18

We as humans are active participants in our own order of things, and while it has revealed not only our tremendous capability of both despair and beauty, it has also shown that we cannot fully create God's vision of hope for our world. Tillich suggests that while there are two orders, the historical ordinary human, and God's eternal order "the two orders, the historical and the eternal, although they can never become the same, are within each other. The historical order is not separated from the eternal order."³ Our world is in fact deeply embedded into God's world, vision, love, and hope. We cannot be separated from God. And that is not only the hope God has for our world, but this is also the definition of incarnation. God's hope-filled presence, while is not wholly of this world, can never be separated from it. Greetings my friends, the Angel of God is speaking to us today, we have found favor in that God's realm is in fact here in a very real, organic, human way. What could be more hopeful than knowing that God is fully embodied and present in our lives and world? What then could also be more perplexing?

Our job, our role is very much like Mary's response. When we say "I am your servant," it requires us to rethink who God is. Like Watt's painting reminds us that hope is not only found in the twinkling beauty of Christmas lights, but rather, hope is born into the very throws of life, Mary's response reveals that God is born into our world and lives exactly as they are now. God is not waiting for us to be better, or the world to work better. God's incarnation is very much like another image. Upon first glance, this image looks like a shadow of a mountain landscape, with the black mountainside offset by the white sky, when in actuality that mountain turns out to be the silhouette of a pregnant woman. As Indian theologian Arundhati Roy states, in this image "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day I can hear her breath." What first looks like our common landscape and world, turns out to be the miracle of life and hope being born into our world. We do not fully know the how of God's birth and incarnation into our world, but as Mary states, "here am I, the servant of the Lord." Our only job is to not only believe that this is possible, that the hope of God's realm is in fact embedded in our own, but as Gabriel's parting words state, we are to believe that nothing will be impossible with God. God is being born into your life. Be quiet ... can you hear her breath?

If you are thinking this is perhaps too contrived, or perhaps too Pollyanna-ish, I offer the words of Jewish poet Denise Levertov. In her poem "Beginners" she states

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life

How could we tire of hope?
- so much is in bud

How can desire fail?
- we have only begun

³ Paul Tillich *The Shaking of the Foundations* p. 23

...

We have only begun to know the
Power that is in us if we would join
Our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
Complete its gesture

So much is in bud.⁴

We, as people of faith may live in our earthly realm, but we know that God's realm, God's real living presence is in fact embedded into the very fabric of life. God came the remote village of Nazareth and is also coming into your life. And it is not only our hope, but our possibility to witness, bring about, and work so that God may be born again anew this Advent season and every day. As Levertov states, if we join our solitude lives into the communion with God and one another, then the bud of God's hope and realm will unfold and be born amongst us. Ponder; be perplexed, for this is surely a hope-filled wondrous word that is spoken to us this day! Greetings, you have found favor in the Lord. Amen.

⁴ Denise Levertov "Beginners" *Cries of the Spirit* p. 181