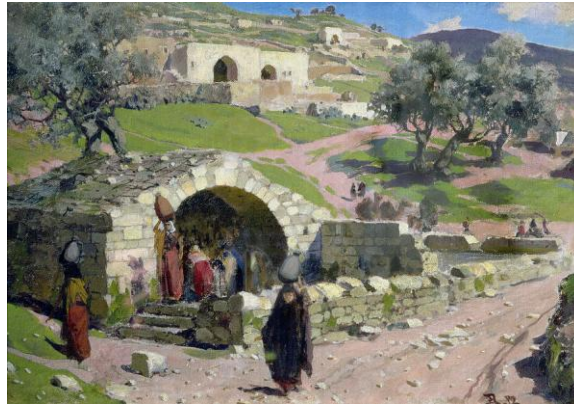


Sermon Series: Expectations
“Unlikely Servants” by David Hockett
Luke 1:26-38

Boone UMC
December 13, 2015



This is an artist's rendering of the village of Nazareth during the time of the birth of Jesus. You'll notice that it's in the hill country, so when Luke says Mary went up into the hill country to a Judean town to visit Elizabeth, she didn't have far to travel. It's where the story begins and perhaps not as you might imagine it would say in the capital, in Jerusalem. The story doesn't begin in Jerusalem or even the more prosperous and cosmopolitan and much larger city of Sepphoris, the Roman capital of Galilee. No the story doesn't begin there either. No, Christmas begins in Nazareth, a thoroughly insignificant, out of the way town of no more than a few hundred people. Not only that, as we saw last week, Christmas begins with Mary, a poor, unwed, uneducated, frightened teenager from an insignificant peasant family.

Maybe it is not the way we would tell the story. It seems like a risky, even questionable way of saving the world. Nazareth is an insignificant place and Mary is an unlikely servant, but here we are. The angel Gabriel, the messenger of Almighty God, coming to this dusty little corner of the world with an announcement for an innocent young girl: *Hail Mary, you are full of grace. Blessed are you and blessed is the Son in your womb, Jesus.* This is an interesting way to save the world to say the least.

You know the Bible actually says very little about Mary and much of what it does say is not highly complimentary. Like the disciples, Mary cannot seem to comprehend what her son is about and by her actions often seems to get in the way of Jesus' mission. Jesus basically tells Mary to mind her own business in Cana at a wedding. (John 2:1-12) And recall Jesus' response when he was told that his mother and brothers had come looking for him. "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. His reply must have stung. "My mother and my brothers are those

who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8) The biological relationship between Mary and Jesus at times seems to stand in the way of her understanding his ministry and of any deepening of their relationship. Now Mary, obviously, is not at the center of the New Testament and along with countless other characters and even the disciples themselves Mary often times stands on the edges of the story.

Today we encounter one of the high points of the New Testament’s witness regarding the mother of our Lord. In today’s gospel Luke portrays Mary as being humbly obedient when she learns that she is to be the mother of the Messiah of Israel. Even though she is likely reluctant and afraid, even though she has many questions and wonders what all of this will mean for her, for Joseph and for their family, Mary is humbly and obediently receptive to God’s initiative of grace in her life and she responds by offering herself to live the life that is being held out to her. *Let it be with me according to your word.* Now that’s a powerful prayer. Jeff has reminded us before that some of the best and most faithful prayers are the shortest and simplest. What a beautiful thing if we learned to really pray this prayer, *Let it be with me according to your word.*

As one writer has observed, “Mary is a sign that God has really intervened in human history, has really involved God’s self in our suffering and our temptations, in our brokenness and our need. Mary of Nazareth, a poor, insignificant young girl, from a no-where, backwoods town is the lowly servant of God. She is a living sacrament pointing us to Jesus, her son, the salvation of the world.”¹ All by praying, “*Let it be with me according to your word.*”

Last Sunday we talked about how, in Jesus, the world has forever changed. In the birth of Mary’s Son, God has upended the kingdoms of this world and all of their posturing and pretension and has inaugurated God’s Kingdom of righteousness and peace on the earth. Because God has come in the flesh and dwelled among us in Jesus, we can live differently here and now. We can by his grace embody the radical change, the transformation, the renewal that Christ makes possible and live new lives that point to God’s dream and hope for the world. We talked about how the Church is called to be a place where that change, that renewal is visible and how we are being called to take up Mary’s song and bear witness to the truth that in Jesus Christ God has come and God will come again. And because God has come, the hungry will be fed, the thirsty will drink, the lonely and lost will be welcome home, and all will be set free from the bondage of sin and death. In Nazareth, in Mary’s Son, change has come.

Now God of course God can do all this without us. And yet, God mysteriously chooses to work through unlikely servants like Mary, like you and me, to bring God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. So it matters that we say, even if it is hesitatingly, reluctantly, and sometimes half-heartedly, it matters that we say, “Here I am; the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according

¹ Unknown source.

to your word.” It matters that we say, with Mary, “Take my life, fill me with your presence, and use me as your servant.”

Christians have been all over the map in how they understand and relate to Mary. Thousands of pages have been dedicated to describing her role in salvation history and countless works of art depict the mother of our Lord. She has been almost worshipped by some parts of the Christian family, and practically neglected by others. For nearly two thousand years Christians have attempted to define Mary, to find meaning in her life for themselves, and their own time and place. One of the phrases or names for Mary that I find particularly powerful comes to us from the Eastern Church who knows Mary as the *Theotokos*, “the God-bearer,” acknowledging that in her womb God and humanity are united. Mary of Nazareth is the only one in whom the Incarnation takes places. In her womb God and humanity are joined, the Creator embraces the creation in a way that redeems, renews, and elevates our humanity to the very gates of heaven. We can no longer use the excuse, “I am only human”, because in Mary’s womb our humanity is redeemed by the presence of God dwelling in us and with us. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “By giving her assent to the angel’s announcement Mary humbly accepted her vocation to carry, to give birth, to nurse, and to raise the Son of God, to bear the very presence of God in her womb.”² And we’re called, unlikely servants that we are, we are called to do the very same.

You know, we have become so accustomed to thinking of our lives as a matter of our own personal choices that when we consider Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel we mistakenly believe that Mary’s “yes” was something she did by her own effort as if she’s like an action movie hero. When in reality it was Mary who was chosen. “Mary’s “yes” was really no choice at all, rather, it was an act of humble acceptance, a willingness to participate in this odd thing God was doing to save the world. Mary did not choose to be the mother of Jesus, the bearer of God, rather she herself was chosen. The angel came with an announcement not a request, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” To which Mary replied, “Let it be with me, according to your word.”³ Let it be with me. “Yes, even though I cannot see how this is possible, how God can accomplish something so wonderful and so miraculous through the likes of me, even though it frightens me to death, even though it may upend my well planned future, let it be with me.” And so we are told that Mary is full of grace, full of God’s kindness, God’s blessing and goodness, filled with Gods’ presence and salvation. And so might we.

The good news of Christmas is not an idea to be debated or a choice to be made, but an announcement to be received. The angel of God comes to each one of us with an annunciation, an announcement - not a request. We often think of being Christians as a matter of our own

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mothers of God*.

³ Ibid.

personal choice but “like Mary, our ‘choices’ often boil down to a simple yes or no: yes, I will live the life that is being held out to me or no, I will not.”⁴ We can hear the good news of Christmas, of God’s coming to be among us, we can hear the gospel call to be bearers of God’s grace, God’s kindness, God’s love and salvation, into the midst of a dark and hurting world and we can say no, I will not be a part of that. Or, odd and frightening as it may be, we can join with Mary and the company of other unlikely servants who have been willing to be used by God for the salvation of the world.

“Now to be sure, deciding to say yes does not mean that you are unafraid, or uncertain, or that from that day forward everything will be a bed of roses. As Mary’s life reminds us, sometimes God asks us to be with people we don’t want to be with, to go places we don’t want to go, and to do things we don’t want to do. Being favored by God and filled with God’s grace doesn’t mean a life bliss, but a life of risk. It means that you are not willing to allow your fear to keep you locked in your room. So you say - yes, let it be with me according to your word, - and in so doing you become one of Mary’s people, one more *Theotokos* who is willing to risk bearing God into the world.”⁵

The German mystic Meister Eckhart once wrote, “We are all meant to be mothers of God...for God is always needing to be born. What good is it that Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago if his birth does not also take place within me? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace, if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son, if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my place? This then is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us.”⁶

Like Mary we might ask, “How can this be? How is this possible? How will this happen, that Christ will be born in me?” The answer is always the same, “the Holy Spirit will come upon you.” It is not by our choice or desire but by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through us that we can be like Mary, unlikely servants, in whom Jesus, the Son of God is pleased to dwell. Christmas is not only about the parties, and the decorations, and the lists. Christmas is not about how much you buy or the boxes and bows beneath the tree. It is about our willingness to say with Mary, “Here am I, Lord. Let it be with me.” “Each day we are invited to live into Mary’s paradox of being the small place where the maker of all things can dwell. Every time we provide welcome, offer a drink of water, open a door, extend an invitation, ask someone to tell his or her story, make room or provide a home, offer bread, speak up for those who have no voice, every time we do these things and more, Mary’s song becomes our song.”⁷

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ David Vryhof, *Mothers of God*, SSJE Journal, 2012.

⁷ Henry Langknecht

Nazareth was an out of the way, nowhere, insignificant place, home of an unlikely servant named Mary who risked saying “yes” to God. God I pray for the grace and the courage to say “Yes, I will live the life that is being offered to me.” And I pray that we can be unlikely servants, like Mary, so that it might be said not only of her but also of us, *Hail favored ones, you are full of grace, and you are richly blessed because unlikely as it may seem, you have become bearers of the Son of God.* We pray this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.