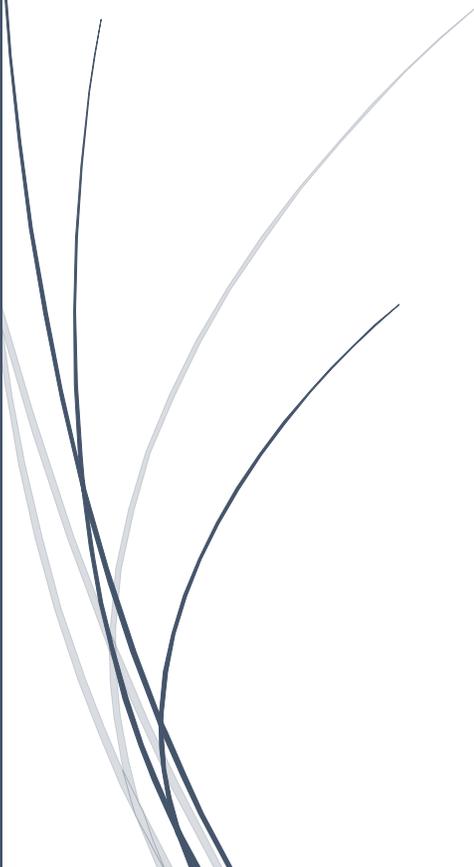




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“Wait – what?”

Luke 1:26-38



Brad Walston
CCUMC

“Wait – What?” – Luke 1:26-38

So it's advent. Time flies, right? It's Advent. The word Advent means “coming” and advent is the four Sundays that Christians begin to prepare for the birth of Jesus Christ. And it's time to talk about what is quite possibly the most famous, best-known story ever told. The annual celebration with lights and special music, with concerts and movies on the Hallmark channel.

Even if you didn't grow up in church you know this story. You know the setting – a manger in a stable in Bethlehem -- Where Palestine is today. You know the characters: Mary, Joseph, some shepherds, some angels, some wise men, rotten King Herod. You probably know some of the plot details – the census, the long journey, no room in the inn...

But the fact that this story IS so familiar is the very reason that we miss some of the richness and depth of this world-changing story. If you're anything like me – when I get to a story in the bible that I know pretty well, I get lazy and I sort of skim over it, you know, like - “I know this story.” And I move on to the next one.

In 1990 Kellogg's came out with a new advertising slogan for Corn Flakes – anyone remember what it was? -- “Taste them again for the very first time.”

Well that's what we're going to do with the Christmas story: ...read it again for the very first time. It'll be fun. It might be enlightening. We'll find new details that we may have missed. We might even find stuff we thought we knew that turn out to be just wrong! And over the next four weeks, hopefully, we'll discover:

- 1) what actually happened leading up to and including the first Christmas;
- 2) what the story tells us about the character of God, and the child whose birth we celebrate;
- 3) And what the story could possibly mean for us, today, 2000 plus years later...

The story begins in Nazareth, 9 months before Jesus was born. Nazareth. Josephus the great 1st century historian never mentions it, neither does the Talmud – the centuries old interpretation and discussion of Jewish law. Nazareth, population between 100 & 400 people - an insignificant backwater of a town. If you were to tell a friend about Nazareth back then, you would describe it as being 3 miles away from the well-known and affluent, nearby town of Sepphoris, population 30,000. Sort of like telling people that we live down-valley from Aspen or just up the road from Glenwood Springs. While Sepphoris was a city of luxurious villas with fancy mosaic floors – the kind you see on the history channel – Nazareth was a town of farmers and shepherds, laborers who commuted an hour each way to work in Sepphoris or to sell their wares.

Instead of villas and mansions, many people from Nazareth lived in houses that were actually carved into the area's soft limestone. Mary and her family could have lived in a cave. It was inexpensive and practical housing. Warm in the winter – cool in the hot Middle Eastern

summer. Some people in the Middle East are still using caves for storage, for animals, and even for housing.

One feature about the town, that strikes me as particularly significant, is the spring. Mary probably grew up fetching water from this spring, and you can still see it flowing there, downstairs in the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation.

FYI: Back in Mary's day, clean water bubbling up from the ground was called "Living Water." Think about Jesus, who spent the first thirty years of his life in and around Nazareth, talking to his disciples about living water. In Jeremiah 2:13 God says, "...my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." Coincidence?

The other feature that I have to mention is the actual meaning of the name of this town: Nazareth – scholars believe that Hebrew word "netzer" which means branch or shoot, is probably the origin of the town name. but it's kind of a weird name for a town – branch?

Any good Jewish person of the day would know – by heart – the passage from Isaiah 11,

*"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch [a netzer] shall grow out of his roots.*

² *The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

³ *His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;*

⁴ *but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

⁵ *Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

⁶ *The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

The word *netzer* – this branch growing up from the chopped down stump. This was a promise of hope for the future that no matter how many times Israel got beaten down, there was still hope. That would be a good reason to name a town "Branchville."

Twelve – maybe thirteen. That was the typical age of betrothal for girls in first century Palestine. Twelve or thirteen – uneducated, and it's very likely that she and her family could have been servants in one of those villas in Sepphoris. Or maybe they were farmers or goatherds. Unpretentious, but faithful Jewish people who walked humbly with their God. It's like God choosing the daughter of an Aspen housekeeper who lives in a trailer park and works two jobs.

Do you remember being thirteen? Anybody here thirteen?

It's a great age. It's a hard age. Acne. Bad hair! First kiss! Everything keeps changing, and just when you get used to one change, here comes another one right on the heels of the last one. And the drama! Remember how everything was so important back then? Even the smallest disappointment was the end of the world. Can you imagine Mary yelling at her Mom, "I hate you!!"

Tweens. – a between time -- a liminal time. Not a child anymore, but so not an adult. Just stuck somewhere in between. If I had to pick a favorite age group that I like working with – I wouldn't. But I love working with middle schoolers. Awkward, but fun. Goofy, funny, and so full of life. Girly...and womanly. Perfect. Probably a bit more mature than many of today's thirteen-year olds, but I don't know...

Then this angel appeared. And it was all over. Mary, or Miriam as she would have been known back then, was one of a long line of people who had an encounter with God that saw their lives changed in an instant.

Abraham had pack up and move. Moses ended up speaking in front of the leader of one of the richest countries of the age, leading over a million people for 40 years through the wilderness. Samson, Jonah, David, an ordinary shepherd boy.

But God didn't ask her to go anywhere or talk to anyone or lead a million people out of oppression – not directly anyway. God asked her – told her, really, to have a baby. God's own Son.

Think for a minute...what would you do if an angel suddenly appeared to you? How would you know it was really an angel from God? What would you say?

A couple of possibilities come to mind: first I can hear poor Mary, busy getting water or something, looking up and saying "Wait ... what?"

Just like us. So busy with all the important things going on in our lives... she almost missed it. And then she almost argues with the angel: "You're going to have a baby."

"Wait – what?"

"You're going to have a baby."

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

And then the big question – “How can this be? I have never been with a man.” It’s good question which was quickly cleared up by the angel.

But what else might have been going on in the back of Mary’s mind – things that didn’t make Luke’s account? I can imagine her thinking OMG - “My parents are going to kill me...”

“I can’t do it.” What am I going to tell Dad? -- Mom, aunts, uncles – the rabbi?

What would the neighbors think? Nazareth was small town – everyone knew everybody’s business. Imagine what they would say behind her back. You can hear the whispers? Slut. Whore.

The mean-ness of the people is bad enough – but remember this is a shame & honor based society. This event would bring shame to her whole family for generations to come... and it was a capital offense! “Wait – what?” A capital offense. Under Jewish law, Joseph had every right to have Mary stoned to death in the town square. And all Mary could say in her defense was that God did it. Who would believe that? Would you?

“Let it be done with me according to your word.” Which might be something Luke made up for effect. I think if it were me I’d barely be able to stammer out a squeaky “OK,” and I’m three times her age!

She agreed to go through with it. She didn’t try to wiggle out of it. She didn’t claim to have speech impediment like Moses – she didn’t jump on the next boat to Tarshish like Jonah did. And she didn’t laugh like Abraham & Sarah did. I’m sure Mary did not feel like laughing. But she said “Yes.”

And in saying ‘yes,’ the annunciation shows us that God can ask great things of the young as well as the old. Moses was 80 when he first stumbled across the burning bush. We know Sarah was 90 when she had Isaac, and Abraham was 100! God calls all of us, young and old, to do impossible things.

And we – we have to be willing. A little courage wouldn’t hurt but we only have to be courageous long enough to say “ok.” Then we can have all the second thoughts we want to. One article I read this week calls Mary the “Patroness of all who are called by God to do impossible things.” Well that’s all of us! We’re called to become embarrassments to our communities and families on God’s behalf, if that’s what it takes. Thank God God doesn’t ask all of to do that – or does he? From the annunciation Mary shows us that answering the call of God isn’t always the comfortable, prim & proper thing. Sometimes people doubt us – or even laugh at us - or call us names.

When the Divine comes crashing through our lives, Mary is our example. She shows us that it's ok to stop and say, "Wait – what?" We can question God's request, but thanks to Mary we can have the guts – the willingness – to say, "Yes....and let it be with me – with us – according to your Word."

Amen.