

The next thin spot on our pilgrimage  
is the town of Nazareth, with fewer than 500 residents,  
all farmers, shepherds, and laborers.

Nazareth was never mentioned in the Old Testament  
and was an insignificant town at the bottom of the hill  
on the wrong side of the tracks.

**Then there was another town called Sepphoris,**  
which was also never mentioned in the Bible.  
Sepphoris was about 4 miles from Nazareth,  
ten times larger, and was at the top of the hill;  
the cream of the crop lived here.  
Jews, Romans, and Greeks with status, power, and money.  
Ornate architecture and glass mosaic floors,  
along with streets paved with limestone and a running water system.  
Many from Nazareth, like the farmers, sold their wares there.  
Today, it is only a ruin, and Nazareth is the center of both  
Arab and Christian culture in the West Bank  
and has the **Church of the Annunciation.**

Mary, our next guide on our Advent pilgrimage,  
was a native of Nazareth,  
but some sources claim that Mary was born in Sepphoris  
and may even have worked in a Roman villa.  
Mary has been honored throughout  
the history of the church with many prayers,  
books, artwork, and church buildings.  
But what do we really know about her?

**We first meet Mary in the Gospels of Matthew  
and Luke as a teenage girl.**  
We don't know how old she was.  
Her days were probably spent like other girls her age,  
drawing water from the community well,  
cooking over a fire, making her own clothes, and tending the fields.  
But in the first century, it was customary  
for parents to arrange marriages for their daughters.  
Mary was arranged in marriage to an older carpenter.  
We also don't know how old Joseph was. ????  
She would remain at her parents' home

until she was old enough to bear a child.  
Mary lived an ordinary life and had  
no reason to expect that to change.  
But Mary did not know that God  
would change the world through her.

Mary had not anticipated the coming of the Messiah,  
and her experience began without any warning.  
The angel Gabriel suddenly came to Mary and said,  
**"Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!"**  
With that heavenly message,  
Mary's world was turned upside down.  
**She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.**  
Put yourself in Mary's shoes and her parents, too.

What would be your response if a stranger  
claiming to be an angel appeared out of nowhere  
before your young daughter and said,  
"I have some good news for you"?  
What would you tell your daughter?  
But Mary was chosen for a reason,  
even though she was scared, and she was listening.

**The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you.**  
When we first look at this, we think  
this is a story about Mary and later Joseph.  
But really, this is a story about God.  
Gabriel did not choose Mary,  
and Mary did not seek out God.  
And neither of them chose the place for this conversation. God did.  
Gabriel continued **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 be the throne of David his father.**  
And after Mary asked how this was possible, Gabriel explains  
**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....**  
**Nothing is impossible for God"**

A new life would begin in Mary's womb.

Sometimes our biggest question  
about the miracle of the virgin birth is how?  
But the Langfords say that is not the real question that we should be asking.  
After all, Gabriel says Nothing is impossible for God.  
No, the real question is not how.  
The miracle was *that* Mary became pregnant,  
and the even larger miracle was *why* Mary became pregnant.  
God took on human flesh to show God's love for us.  
Emmanuel God with skin on.

And after Gabriel has said all of this,  
he waits for her response.  
How would Mary respond?  
I mean, it is a lot to take in. Angels.  
Miraculous births by God.  
Not something you hear every day.  
She replied, "**I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.**"

Roman Catholics celebrate the  
Feast of the Annunciation on March 25 each year.  
That date has significance when you think  
about our date for Christmas on December 25.  
But above all else, we remember Mary's faithful  
acceptance of Gabriel's announcement,  
and she models for us how we should respond to God.

After the Annunciation, Mary traveled from Nazareth to Judea,  
a trip of about eighty miles, to visit her cousin Elizabeth.  
Elizabeth, who was also pregnant by a miracle of God.  
When Elizabeth saw Mary and heard her voice,  
the child in her own womb leaped for joy.  
Elizabeth exclaimed, "**God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry**"  
This event, the Visitation, is celebrated on May 31.  
Elizabeth would have been a wise mentor to Mary, a younger woman.  
And Elizabeth's child, John the Baptist,  
would prepare the way for the coming of Jesus.

In response to Elizabeth's welcome,  
Mary sang a song of praise, known to us as the.

Mary gave thanks for God's divine mercy not only for her but throughout the ages for all of God's people.

It begins "**With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.**

Mary's hymn doesn't focus on Mary but on God's mighty acts of salvation.

This is how we begin to understand how in the world Mary is willing to bear the Christ Child.

Was she weak and powerless or strong-willed?

Really, she was neither.

We honor **Mary because she simply or not so simply said yes to God.**

God offered her an important role, but Mary, like all of us having free will, could have refused God's call.

Yet Mary agreed to be God's servant.

Mary agreed to let the Word of God reshape her body and her life.

And through her, God would reshape all of creation.

Mary's response to God was submission.

Submitting to someone else's will is seen as weak in our world and, in certain circumstances, can be demeaning or even life-threatening when the submission is unwilling.

But submission can also be a voluntary act of obedience, an act of strength and courage.

Once again, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

"It is not the gentle, sweet, dreamy Mary that we so often see portrayed in pictures, but the passionate, powerful, proud, enthusiastic Mary."

Mary's yielding to God was an act of faith. She submitted, and God linked God's plan to her life and God's mighty acts of salvation. God did not choose Mary because of her weakness but because of her faithful character. Her obedience reveals a woman willing to give herself wholly to God. Her submission was not an act of powerlessness but one of bold proclamation.

And so, Mary really became the first disciple of Jesus Christ.  
She was the first person to hear about  
and accept Jesus as the Savior.  
And her obedience was hard work.

**Toward the end of Mary's pregnancy, she and Joseph travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem.**

The journey from the hill country of Galilee  
to that Judean village just several miles from Jerusalem  
would have been around 90 miles and taken about a week.  
Some of us have taken the Christmas IQ quiz  
I shared at Beersheba on Monday, and at last  
year's Good News Christmas class party.  
One of the questions was what kind of animal did Mary ride to Bethlehem?  
The answer is, of course, what? A donkey right. Well wrong.

Tradition, artwork, songs, and Christmas cards show us  
that Mary rode a donkey to Bethlehem with Joseph walking,  
but it is more likely that Mary simply walked there.

Yes, in her last weeks of pregnancy.

Mary was tough.

Mary must have known this journey  
would be hard and full of trials,  
from the loss of her family to the loss of her reputation  
in her community and for all the years ahead.

Mary's submission and obedience lead us to  
the third part of our Wesleyan idea of grace called **sanctification**.  
Followers of Jesus Christ must not only receive  
God's preventer grace and justifying grace, but also sanctifying grace.  
Sanctifying grace is God's ongoing work  
in our lives to make us whole and perfect,  
not in the sense of without error,  
but perfect in our love for God and our neighbor.  
Sanctification means being made holy and loving God completely.

Mary was sanctified, made holy as God's grace  
transformed her from an ordinary young girl in Nazareth  
to the Mother of the Son of God in Bethlehem.  
God empowered Mary to become the person  
God created her to be fully.

God continually worked in Mary,  
seeking to make her whole in love.

**We are called to follow the example of Mary.**

We cannot stop on our journey of salvation.  
Gabriel's announcement was just the first  
moment of Mary's pilgrimage, not her final one.  
When we have our mountaintop experiences,  
we still have to come down from the mountain  
and continue to grow in our faith and faithfulness.

This is what Advent helps us do through  
studying the scriptures of the prophets, praying, worshiping,  
and living into the story of the coming of the Christ Child again.  
During each week of December,  
we move from Hope that leads to Peace,  
which leads to Joy, which we celebrate this Sunday.  
We grow more loving of God and loving of our neighbors  
as we open our shut-up hearts to a world in need  
and the people all around us struggling.  
And we do good and acts of mercy with those  
who are hurting in our church, our community, and around our world.  
Because God is continuing work  
within us, seeking to make us holy.

A contemporary song that ponders how much  
Mary understood her part in God's plan, which is titled *Mary Did You Know?*  
written by Mark Lowry of The Gaithers.  
One line of the song says to Mary,  
"When you kiss your little baby, you've kissed the face of God."  
Mary's faithful obedience continues to be a source of inspiration.

**How might Mary guide us further in our pilgrimage toward Christmas?**

First, if God could recognize the young teenager Mary,  
surely **God also knows each of us.**  
The Squires have three traditions that we try to schedule every year.  
First is doing Hannah's tree in her room;  
she now has a pink tree too.  
Another is building our family's Gingerbread house.  
**But before that, our biggest tradition is doing our Family Tree**

with all our ornaments from our almost  
20 years together as a family, and in our lives before.  
And we remember every story about the ornaments  
and place our new family ornament.  
One of my favorite quotes from Max Lucado is this.  
**If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it.**  
God knows us all by face and name.

**Second, God has an invitation for each of us.**

Are we willing not only to rejoice that God knows us  
but also that God is always calling us onto a new path?  
Most of us believe that we can plan our lives  
and know how they are going to turn out.  
But most of the time, we are wrong. Right?  
We plan God laughs.

And the angel Gabriel may not appear to us, but God still speaks.  
Maybe in worship, through a Christmas Carol,  
or through our giving, or in a conversation  
God has a different invitation for each of us.  
Maybe God's prevenient grace is inviting you  
to move past a habit, a hurt, or a hangup in your lives.  
Will you let God forgive you and re-form you?  
With justifying grace, God may ask you to accept God's love  
and have confidence in yourself and God.  
For nothing is impossible for God.  
Or maybe God is calling us to be more holy  
through our acts and through our service to others.

**Saying yes to God also brings us joy.**

We experience deep fulfillment whenever  
our dreams and actions are aligned with God's.  
We find assurance that God will stand by us in good days and bad.  
So, too, will we be surrounded by a community of believers.  
On our journey of faith, we will always receive  
the grace to love God and others.  
Ultimately, we will live and reign with Jesus the Christ forever.  
By following Mary's example,  
we, too, will be called blessed.  
During Advent, may we honor the Mother of God

and be disciples that say yes like her.