

“A New Journey In Nazareth”

Luke 1:26-35

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Advent was one week away, so a Sunday school teacher wanted to see what the children remembered about Advent season devotions the year before: “Who can tell me what the four candles in the Advent wreath represent?” she asked. Luke jumped in with seven-year-old wisdom and exuberance. He said, “There’s love, joy, peace and ...and...” “I know!” six-year-old Elise interrupted to finish her brother’s sentence: “Peace and quiet!” I thank Ruby and Wade for lighting the first Advent candle this morning. This morning’s candle is a candle of hope. I also appreciate again our worship committee and volunteers who set up the Advent wreath and our sanctuary decorations. During the season of Advent, we will light one candle each Sunday, waiting for the Messiah’s coming as a part of our Advent services.

The word, “Advent” means “coming.” Each candle represents an aspect of the spiritual preparation for the coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ. If you wait for your Messiah, what are things that you’re desperately looking for? We put five candles as symbols of Hope, Love, Joy (the pink candle) and Peace and one Christ candle in the middle representing our anticipation for Christ’s arrival. We decorated our sanctuary and advent wreath with circular garlands of evergreen branches which represent eternity, and we used Chrismons which show varieties of ancient Christian symbols for our Christian faith and Jesus Christ. This morning, we lit the first candle of “Hope” as we prepare our hearts for Christmas. We anticipate our Messiah in hope.

We know that life is not easy. Hope gives us a reason to keep going and helps us to move forward. Some of us may struggle with difficulties at different stages of life. No matter what hardship you are having in your life journey, if you have hope, you will go through, and you can step forward towards a light in the end of a tunnel. Our Messiah is coming down to us as a light to expel darkness, as hope. When light comes in, darkness slowly goes away. Darkness is a state of the absence of light. In the same way, despair is a state of the absence of hope. God is our hope. Imagine having no hope in your life; no one could survive even a day. Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian, said that we come to know the truth of hope: “If we are forced to stand our ground against despair, we will know its power when we realize that it keeps us alive in the midst of death.” Or as the poet Tagore put it, “Hope is like the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark.” Advent is the season that we are

waiting for a new life which will save us. God is coming to us in a child and that child will change us!

Today's Scripture reading describes the first encounter between the angel Gabriel and a young woman whose name is Mary. It starts from a place which was called Nazareth. God sent the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary and said to her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus." Advent begins from this place - a conversation between the angel and Mary. Let's explore a little more about the town of Nazareth and Mary. In Jesus' time, Nazareth was a very small town. Probably, it may not have come to our attention if it had had nothing to do with Jesus' birth story. Its population is estimated to have been between one hundred and four hundred people only. There was a large town called Sepphoris nearby Nazareth. Its population was over thirty thousand, and there were luxurious villas, markets and businesses, but Nazareth was one of the poor towns. Many people lived in caves because they couldn't afford to build houses. Even Mary's family would have lived in a cave. Even to Jewish people, Nazareth was considered an insignificant town, but God began His new plan and a new start in this place. Where can you find a message of hope in our reading?

Through research, I learned that the word Nazareth may come from the Hebrew, *netzer*, which means "branch" or "shoot." Sometimes, when a tree is chopped down, a shoot will grow from the stump, allowing a new tree to spring up where the old one has died. That shoot is called, in Hebrew, a *netzer*. As you know the history of Israel, Israel was divided into two countries. The northern Israel was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C. and the southern part, known as Judah, was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire in 587 B.C. Fifty years later, when the Israelites would return to their country, they had to rise up like a shoot. The word *Nazareth* was a promise of hope. The village of Nazareth was the expression of hope that God would once again restore Israel. Truly God started His great plan in this little town. We should remember that God's way is quite different from our way. When we feel that everything is over, we say there is no more hope, but that may not be the end. There is hope in God. God never gives up. God looks for the humble people, especially for those who are suffering from pain, wounded hearts and who are hopeless, in despair in their lives. Do you remember that God chose a slave people who worked for Egyptians for four hundred to be his chosen people? God is coming down to find us, to deliver us and to give us a brand new start for life. Our God is a deliverer and a Savior from our trouble. Hope is another name of the Messiah.

Mary lived in Nazareth. In her times, young women married when they were teenagers. We may find it strange today, but this was at a time when the average life expectancy was less than thirty-five-years. Mary was engaged to be married. According to custom, there would be a year-long-legal engagement followed by a formal ceremony. Mary must have been excited about her wedding day. All of the sudden, one day, Mary was notified from God's messenger that her life would be changed. She would be pregnant and would be the mother of the Son of God. Can you imagine her feelings? Do you think that she was overjoyed or excited about this news or confused and worried about her life change? She had a right to say, "Well, let me think about this. Will you come back later?" I am sure that she must have been confused, deeply concerned about herself and her life. But her response was clear. She simply said, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your will.' Even though she couldn't fully understand God's plan, she sensed that God would bring us a new life for all people. She decided to offer herself wholly to God. We know that this may put her in danger, but she said "Yes" despite knowing that according to the law, young women who were engaged but found to be pregnant by someone other than her fiancé were to be stoned to death. She said "Yes" despite knowing that it would mean the end of dreams she had for her wedding day, and it would likely lead to Joseph calling off the marriage. The point of her response was that whatever was to happen to her, even if that involved giving up her dreams and plans, she would not lose hope that God would be with her. Her hope in God kept her strong and brave to take this all in. She had first trust and faith in the Lord.

Hope comes from a firm trust that we believe in. God is our hope that we can firmly trust Him in our difficult times. We need Mary's attitude in this season of Advent. Since Mary had trust in God's goodness and his faithfulness, she found hope with saying "yes" to the angel Gabriel. She was taking a risk to be stoned to death, but she was not afraid because she had hope that God would not leave her alone but that God would be with her. She had trust about God's plan. So she could move forward. Don't remain in despair. God will not leave you alone or abandoned. Let God be your hope and help in your life journey. No matter what difficulties threaten you in the storms of your life journey, I hope that you can put your trust in the Lord as your final hope. God promised us a hope that God will come and deliver us. That is why we are anxiously waiting for the Messiah's coming in this special season of hope.