

“A New Journey Begins”

Luke 1:26-35

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Some ideas and insights from Adam Hamilton's book, *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem* (2011)

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. The word, “Advent” literally means ‘arriving’ and it originally derives from the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. ‘Advent’ has deeper meaning than ‘future’. Future doesn’t contain our anxious waiting and yearning, but Advent involves our longing of God’s coming in our anticipation. Do you know that Advent opens the new Church year? Our new journey begins from the season of Advent. What does it mean to begin a new year in this season of Advent? A new beginning won’t be automatically given to us. Without cold winter, there will be no season of spring, it is truth that without repentance, there will be no salvation. We can’t really understand Christmas if we don’t prepare for a time to examine our hearts looking for the coming of our Savior. In this sense, Advent is a preparation of our hearts and souls for a new beginning.

Over the next four Sundays, we are going to have a special time of Jesus Christ’s coming by following the journey of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Our worship ministry team found out that it was about 80 miles. Have we ever imagined Mary and Joseph’s fear and anxiety while traveling such a long distance journey through the mountains, deserts and dark valleys? Their journey can be our life journey, especially a young girl, pregnant Mary’s trip to Bethlehem. Their travel was not a luxurious honeymoon trip. Rather it was a hard one. Even they were not married yet. But without this trip, there will be no Messiah! The season of Advent gives us an opportunity to examine our hearts and to start over with new hope in Christ. The destination, the town of Bethlehem can be a place of hope. The poet Tagore says, "Hope is like the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark." This morning, we will begin our journey in hope!

Today’s Scripture reading describes the first encounter between the angel Gabriel and a young woman whose name is Mary. It starts from 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.” In Jesus’ time, Nazareth was a very small town. Probably, it may not have come to our attention if there had been 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 poor towns. Many people lived in caves because they couldn't afford to build the houses. Even Mary's family would have lived in a cave. Even to Jewish people, Nazareth was considered as an insignificant town, but God began His new plan and a new start in this place.

The word, Nazareth comes 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 Nazareth was the expression of hope that God would once again restore Israel. Truly God started God's 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 are hopeless in despair in their lives. Do you remember that God chose a slave people who worked for Egyptians for four hundred years 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 deliverer and 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 at that time 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 be excited about her wedding day. All of sudden, one day, Mary was notified from God's messenger that her life will be changed. She will be pregnant and will be the mother of the Son of God. Can you imagine her feelings? She had a right to say, "Well, let me think about this. Will you come back later?" Mary must be confused, deeply concerned about her future life. But she 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 decided to offer herself wholly to God. We know that this may put her in danger, but her response is "Yes". 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 is that whatever happens to her, even giving up her dreams and plans, she will not lose a hope that God is her guide.

Hope comes from a firm trust that we believe in. God is our hope that we can firmly trust 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 will not leave her alone but God will be with her. She had trust God's plan. So she can move forward. Let God be your hope and help in your life journey. No matter what difficulties threaten you in the storms of life. I hope that you will put your trust in the Lord. God promises us a hope that God will be with us. That is why we are anxiously waiting for the Messiah's coming in this season. Amen.