

Sermon 12-06-09<sup>1</sup>

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:26-38

The Importance of Place: Nazareth

In reading through this passage, my thoughts were drawn to Frank Capra's indelible classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*. If ever there was a story of mediocrity and the ordinariness of human life, then it's the story of Bedford Falls and George Bailey. Most, if not all, of you are certainly familiar with the movie. You're familiar with George Bailey's attempts to rise above his life in Bedford Falls only to find himself mired deeper and deeper within that place. Yet, what we discover by the end of the movie is the reality that George isn't ordinary and Bedford Falls isn't mediocre. George thought he was a failure but in many ways, he discovered that his life was filled with blessing through the many lives he touched. This is summed up in Clarence's wonderful words written on the inside of *Tom Sawyer*: No man is a failure who has friends. And at the end of the movie, we're reminded that no matter how ordinary or mediocre a situation, or a place, or our lives might be it doesn't change the fact that extraordinary things can happen in the midst of the relationships forged. In many ways, this is the reminder of the good news of the gospel that we hear in Gabriel's announcement to Mary.

As small villages go in the ancient world, Nazareth was, for lack of a better phrase, the "armpit of the universe." While as Christians living 2000 years later, we take it for granted that Nazareth is the place where Jesus comes from, at the time, Nazareth was a little known village of absolutely no significance. Remember if you will, what John reports in his Gospel. Andrew comes running up to Nathanael, informing him that they found the

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messiah, this guy named Jesus from Nazareth. In response, Nathanael replies, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” It’s never mentioned in the Old Testament and never gained any real importance within the ancient world. You could pass through Galilee and never know you missed it. As small villages go, it was doomed to mediocrity the rest of its existence; that is until the coming of the angel Gabriel.

The early readers of Luke’s Gospel must have been astonished to hear these verses of scripture. Whereas Gabriel comes to Zechariah in the temple, as we heard last week, in that one particular location within the Israelite faith that was deemed the holiest, Gabriel goes to the far country to meet Mary. We’re given no preparation for this. In going to Nazareth, Gabriel’s announcement to Mary should catch us completely by surprise; emphasizing the sheer ordinariness of this woman who lives in such a mediocre town. Yet this young 13 or 14 year old woman will play such a critical role in the fulfillment of God’s promises to his people. Up to this point, we’re given no hint that Mary lived an extraordinary life; no hint that she knew she would be called to fulfill such a critical role in God’s story of salvation for the world. Breaking into the midst of her ordinary life in that mundane place called Nazareth, the glory of the Lord penetrates and through Gabriel offers what has to be an odd greeting. “Rejoice, favored one. The Lord is with you.”

Now, I imagine that Mary must have had a look of fear and dread upon her face. Nothing exciting ever happens in Nazareth. Sure there was that one day when Jebadiah’s goats got loose and ransacked Obadiah’s home, but other than that, nothing truly remarkable ever happened. It is natural to assume that that following this strange greeting by Gabriel, this invitation to rejoice, that Mary becomes confused; even frightened. An encounter like this doesn’t happen every day and had to be unsettling. But in response to

her confusion and fear, Gabriel says, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” And offering the purpose for his visit, Gabriel proclaims some scandalous news: out of all the people in the world, Mary, living in this Podunk, backwoods village, has been consecrated for a very specific task; one that doesn’t come with a lot of bells and whistles, but stress. Even more, it has nothing to do with anything Mary did to deserve it. Like the prophets and the people called to serve the Lord within the Old Testament, the Word of the Lord comes to her out of the freedom of God’s love and power.

“Look,” Gabriel proclaims, “you will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, he will rule over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Talk about receiving unexpected news. One minute Mary’s going about her business, going about her ordinary and mundane life in Nazareth, and the next thing she knows she’s told that she will become pregnant and give birth to the only-begotten Son of God full of grace and truth.

“But how can this be,” Mary responds, “since I have never been with a man?” Mary’s pretty much saying, “Are you sure you’ve got the right person? Mary is a pretty common name and there’s another Mary who lives next door, she’s got a gaggle of kids. Maybe you meant to visit here rather than me?” Engaged to Joseph, their marriage has not yet been solidified, so it’s a pretty simple formula in Mary’s mind: no sex=no baby. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure that out. But then comes the remarkable, astonishing, inexplicable, earth-shattering, world-altering, history-changing, cosmos-shaking, kingdom-of-God-anticipating good news of great joy: the Holy Spirit will come upon her and overshadow her. Gabriel promises that the same Holy Spirit present from the beginning of all time; this

Holy Spirit who swept over the vast void and was an active part in the creation of the cosmos and our world is the same Holy Spirit who will descend upon the womb of Mary.

To many, these details border on the strange and the unusual as we begin to wonder how to make biological sense out of any of this. But Luke's concern in telling the story has nothing to do with the biological details involved with this conception. He doesn't really care how a virgin can conceive a child. Rather, Luke casts the work of the Holy Spirit upon the womb of Mary in the holiest of mysteries; evoking a sense of the sheer awesome power of God to do a new thing in the midst of the world to fulfill God's purposes therein. In essence, according to Gabriel, nothing will be impossible for God. From out of the depths of mediocrity and the ordinary shines the glorious good news of God's extraordinary love and unfailing faithfulness to the world.

Nothing good was expected out of Nazareth. Even her people didn't hold high expectations. Yet in that place, when the specific time came, we hear of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit upon the womb of Mary, bringing about a conception and a birth that will change the course of human history, the course of cosmic history from that point on and for all eternity. The ordinary is defied. For this isn't the promise of any ordinary child; this is the promise that God himself will break into the course of human history; penetrating into the depths of our human existence in, through, and as Jesus; through the womb of Mary, God breaks in upon the life of the world to reveal God's purposes of salvation, to redeem creation, and restore creation to holy communion with God, healing the brokenness of our sinful disobedience by engrafting us to the very life of God incarnate. In one moment, Mary's life and the life of the world, our lives, are turned upside down—and this is very, very good news indeed. Yet it is easily forgotten.

We wander through life sometimes, and we are apt to have periods or seasons where we get pretty down on ourselves. We feel guilty about the mistakes we've made, for the paths we haven't taken; we feel guilty when we leave something unaccomplished or even, when we feel as if we have let God down. We get caught up in the mediocrity and ordinariness of life and so we seek out those things that will hopefully erase our melancholy and guilt. But nothing seems to satisfy it. Within those moments we are left with frustration and anger: "Why God, did things have to work out this way? Why did I lose my job? Why do my children not love me? Why am I unhappy?" And it's at that point where we reach the root of the human predicament. We try so hard to pick ourselves up by our bootstraps and make a go of things ourselves, and then when the bottom drops out we blame God for our mistakes. It's much easier that way. But that's not the reality of the Gospel.

The glorious good news of great joy delivered to Mary within the promise of her son is the good news that we aren't left in life, straining to make our way to God or badger God to listen to us. Quite the opposite. The Good News is that God comes to us in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Within the announcement to Mary, we find the declaration of God's sovereign glory. Nothing will be impossible for the Lord God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. This is the God who called forth life through his Word, who raises up prophets and kings, who delivers his people from the land of Egypt. This is the Lord God who will bring life forth from nothing, sending his only-begotten Son into the midst of sinful flesh to heal that flesh, to be one with humanity, and to offer up from within humanity the perfect life of obedience and faithfulness that only God can provide. In that moment, we realize that our lives are caught up within the grand drama

playing out in that ordinary house in Nazareth. In that place, we discover the center of our lives, the center of our faith, and the one around whom everything revolves. In the announcement to Mary, our lives are opened up so that we might know that God loves us, God comes to us not only in or through but also as Jesus, and that God is with us in such a way that he lifts us out of our guilt, joins us to his life, and leads us into a way of living filled with thankfulness and communion with God. Whatever place we find ourselves within, either spatial or physical, we are not doomed for a life of mediocrity for we know that God is with us, changing us from the inside out, so that no matter what, we might have a share in the glory that is to come. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.