

“Mary of Nazareth”  
by Rom A. Pegram (12/2/18)

So, what’s the big deal about Advent? Two words: *Black Friday* (and all that it stands for)! Today, folks, it seems that Halloween is now the new unofficial beginning of the Christmas season! Yet somehow, even though we’ve extended the season of Christmas, we’ve also moved further away from the real meaning of Christmas...

Christmas, all too often today, seems like an orgy of overindulgence. Many families go into debt to make sure their children have “enough” under the tree at Christmas ... and then watch their kids become weary on Christmas morning from opening so many presents. We find ourselves with a “Christmas hangover” when the credit card bills arrive. Somehow we miss out on the true message—especially the true JOY—of Christmas...

That’s why Advent’s so important! More than ever, folks, **Advent matters!** Ever since the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century, this is how the Church has prepared believers for Christmas. The word “Advent” comes from the Latin “*adventus*” meaning ‘coming.’ Christians use this opportunity both to recall Jesus’ coming to earth as a babe in Bethlehem ... and to prepare themselves for Jesus’ promised return (2<sup>nd</sup> Coming) to earth. And this is how we’re going to use this season, too.

This year, folks, we’re going to journey together, just as the Holy couple did at the time of the birth of Jesus, our Savior—beginning with the ‘mom’ of the story, Mary. And, as we study the one God chose to be the mother of our Savior, let’s also be on alert for *who God is in this story*. In other words, who was God in the life of Mary of Nazareth? If we discover some new answers to that question, it may very well help us to realize *who God wants to be in our lives*, too...

Today, I invite you to take a journey with me, from the peasant village of Nazareth to the little town of Bethlehem. We’ll talk together about the whole cast of the Christmas story—Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, the shepherds, the wise men—always trying to understand the significance of the child whose birth brought them all together. My hope and prayer is that *we will all come to see this very familiar story with fresh eyes ... and that its message might change our lives as it has countless others in the years* since that holy night long, long ago. Let’s begin with the story from the Gospel of Luke (1:26-38, NLT):

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee,<sup>27</sup> to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David.<sup>28</sup> Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”<sup>29</sup> Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean.<sup>30</sup> “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God!<sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.<sup>32</sup> He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.<sup>33</sup> And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”<sup>34</sup> Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”<sup>35</sup> The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy,

and he will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's now in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For nothing is impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

In looking to the story of Mary of Nazareth, trying our best to discover who God was in her life, that we might know God better in our own lives, let me ask these questions: First...

**Why Nazareth?** The Christmas story begins in the town of Nazareth, nine months before Jesus' birth. Now, if any part of the story begs for our attention to detail, it's this one! So, it's worth taking a good look at this little town and what it might tell us about the nature and character of God...

Let me begin with these opening remarks: Nazareth is much more widely known today than it ever was in Jesus' day. It's not among the 63 villages of Galilee listed in the Hebrew Talmud or the 45 Galilean villages mentioned by 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish historian Josephus, who knew the area well. This was one insignificant little town! Its population was somewhere between 100-400 people, though its lack of mention in the Talmud or by Josephus might suggest it was far smaller—not really worth mentioning. Brownsville, Wisconsin is around 600 people; so Brownsville might be double what Nazareth would have been in Mary's day...

Sepphoris, a large nearby town of about 30,000 people would have been well known. That's probably where a good number of Nazareth's folks went to work—as servants of the wealthy in Sepphoris. While in Israel a few years ago, our tour group went to Sepphoris for the first time. There, you will find ruins of luxury Roman villas, with extravagant mosaic floors. Nazareth, on the other hand, had few of these things. The inhabitants of Nazareth were not affluent people by any stretch of the imagination—a people who probably dwelt in the soft limestone caves around Nazareth. Nothing fancy there; just good, honest, hard-working people in Mary's hometown...

But here, folks, are some significant things you may want to remember about Nazareth... Nazareth was: A place of living water... A couple hundred years prior to Jesus' birth, Nazareth was settled in a place that had an excellent water supply—a *spring*. Mary would've grown up fetching water from that spring ... and, in fact, it still flows today; here are a couple of details you might not know: In biblical times, spring water—as opposed to other water sources—was referred to as 'living water.' I can't help but think that Jesus, who spent nearly 30 years in Nazareth, drew on the memory of that spring when he said to the woman at the well (John 4:10, NLT): "... 'If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.'"—the kind of water source preferred by all ... *cool, clean, and bubbling up from the earth*; Nazareth was a place of living water ... and it was also...

A place of cave-dwellers... The poor used what was readily available to them ... caves being their first shelters, then as they added on to the front, the old caves would

become the place for their animals—a manger. This is how Mary’s family would have lived in Nazareth (Basilica of the Annunciation) ... and it was also...

A place of special meaning... The name Nazareth probably came from the Hebrew *netzer* which means ‘branch’ or ‘shoot.’ So, why would the people who founded this small village call it ‘the branch?’ Israel would be led someday by a messianic figure called ‘the branch,’ so Isaiah says (Isaiah 11:1-4, NLT): Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot— yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. <sup>2</sup> And the Spirit of the LORD will 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. <sup>3</sup> He will delight in obeying the LORD. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. <sup>4</sup> He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked.

The *netzer* (the branch) was a promise of hope—a place of special meaning; so, *why Nazareth ... also...*

**Why Mary?** Mary was an unlikely choice... A woman, who grew up in poverty, once described to her pastor the formative years of her childhood. She lived in a trailer park (down south) at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. Kids teased her at school, calling her “trailer trash,” a name they’d learned from their parents. Forty years and a law degree later, she described how it felt as a child to feel small and insignificant.

When I think of Mary of Nazareth, I think of this story. If the tradition is correct, Mary’s family lived in the cheapest form of affordable housing at that time: a cave. Probably a 13-year-old girl, engaged to be married to a man not much older than she was, from a village, again, considered of “no account.” But, it was precisely here that God came looking for this young woman to bear his Son. Mary, folks, was *an unlikely choice ...* and she was also one who was given...

An unlikely mission... Her mission in life? To bear the Son of God Almighty—the Messiah, the One who was coming to save her people (*and everyone else*). Mary was also a part of...

An unlikely meeting... She met with the angel Gabriel—a messenger of God, frightened not so much by his appearance as by his message. Mary’s response, however, was simple and profound—a response of faith! Knowing full well that young women who were legally engaged and found pregnant by someone other than their fiancé were to be stoned to death, she still said yes...

My last question for us today is this: Why Me? Why Nazareth? Why Mary? And *why me*? Who is this God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, in your life today?

From the story of Mary, we've learned that ... God chooses those to do his work from the most unlikely places and ... God routinely chooses the humble and the least expected to do his greatest work (Mary recognized this – Luke 1:46-55)...

Do you take the time, do you pay attention to what's happening around you, and do you listen so that you don't miss out on what God is trying to speak to you today?

Unfortunately, many of us are so busy, so preoccupied with our stuff, or in such a hurry ... that there's no time to listen for how God might be speaking to us. *Just imagine if Gabriel had approached Mary while she was fetching water and had said, "I'm sorry, I'm really busy right now. Do you think you could come back later?"* Or if she had dismissed him as a 'crackpot' when he tried to tell her about God's plan for her life? And yet ... this is precisely the response many of us would give ... in our busy/preoccupied lives today.

Folks, God speaks through his word, through the still small voice of his Holy Spirit, and also through people (and occasionally heavenly messengers). Pay attention during this season! Listen for the unexpected, lest you miss out on God's surprises and purpose for *your* life...