

... May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and of you, who are ROCK, REDEEMER, and COMFORTER of us all. Amen.

Luke 1:26b-32a, 38 ... Each week we are visiting with a familiar biblical story which invites us to listen and respond with courage, trust, & live with hope. Today the focus is with a well-known story from Luke. In this familiar portion of the Birth Narratives, Mary is called to serve, and she responds 'yes Lord'.

Mary is a young girl living in the small town of Nazareth. In 1st century Palestine, Nazareth set 3 miles outside of the opulent Roman-established city of Sepphoris. Herod the Great and Herod Antipas both used this location as a capital city. Today, Sepphoris is an archeological site where the amphitheater can be seen and beautiful mosaics have been uncovered. It is, otherwise, in ruins. Nazareth, however, continues to thrive, and is home to the largest Christian church in the region since being built in 1969, the Church of the Annunciation.

Archeological evidence suggests the townspeople of Nazareth were both agricultural and trades people, such as carpenters, like Joseph and Jesus.

We have a glimpse of how insignificant the town of Nazareth was when we remember Nathaniel's comment to Phillip in John's gospel (1:46) after learning Jesus of N is the one about whom the prophets wrote. Nathaniel responds, 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' serving as evidence that simple, hardworking people were held in general disdain just because they were located in the shadow of a power city.

In this setting, Mary is approached by a stranger, a messenger named Gabriel. Gabriel greets her as blessed and highly favored, and reassures her with that familiar phrase, 'Don't be afraid!' and another interesting word, 'God is honoring you.' How strange! Gabriel isn't done because he then proceeds to share the news of a child to be born to her. Then the most astonishing news of all... this will be the Messiah!

As we know, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth who is also with child. At their encounter Mary is told she is blessed, highly favored and honored.

What are we to make of this calling put on Mary...that she is blessed, highly favored & honored? The rest of the story is full of challenge, risk, and heartache.

When we remember the life of Mary from this special moment with Gabriel, we can see how hard life was for Mary... unwed, pregnant...scandalous! Her fiancé nearly dumps her...heartbreaking! Goes to visit her cousin...hiding away from scandal & condition... close to giving birth having to travel another city far off... homeless, no place to stay. Then, Herod's insecurity forces them to flee to another country as refugees. Later, Mary will watch her son be nailed to a cross and die as a common criminal.

There's no easy path, no life of bliss or freedom from hardship, yet she is blessed, highly favored, and honored by God. What do we make of this?

There are many blessings that come in life... in my life, and no doubt in your lives. Most, if not all have included a measure of risk, hardship, sacrifice and challenge. Marriages certainly include these difficulties, so does parenting.

The call to serve as a pastor has been one of the greatest blessings in my life, certainly it is a great honor, yet it has been heart-wrenching in numerous times.

I am certain the same can be said for what you've experienced in life.

Gabriel's words are as important for us to hear and remember as they were for Mary... 'The Lord is with you! Don't be afraid.'

We hear these two phrases over and over, in some fashion, when we read scripture. We need to keep them in the front of our memory, so that we can freely respond to the calls and nudges from God... 'Here I am, Lord, your servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.' As hard as it has been to say these words, to surrender, and stop wrestling with God, I have been blessed every...single...time. This week, reflect on how God has honored you & favored you in your callings & your blessings. Let's pray ... *Lord, help me hear your call to take risks, make sacrifices, and do what is inconvenient. Help me remember that it is in pursuing these challenges that we find your greatest blessings. Give me the courage to respond to your call with Mary's words: I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said."* Amen.