



# On the Way to Bethlehem

## Week 4: Nazareth

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For this Advent season we have been walking through the Christmas story by visiting some of the places that figure into the night of Jesus' birth. We have been to Rome—the home of the political and military power of the day. We have seen how oppressive power wielded from way above and far off created fraught living conditions for the Israelites of that time. They were allowed to live among the ruins of their former nation, but they were heavily taxed and thoroughly ignored unless they were being taken advantage of. They lived with memories of a promise for deliverance... but there had been no sign of that deliverance for generations.

Last week we moved to Jerusalem. The place of waiting. We met Zechariah and Elizabeth—who had been promised a baby, but were barren into their old age. They were the living embodiment of Israel's waiting. Generation after generation passed down those promises of deliverance, but generation after generation had died with them unfulfilled. But in Jerusalem, in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we found a little bloop! Like a fish jumping in a lake at midnight. There is a hint of something happening. A little jump of hope. Elizabeth who was barren is pregnant.

And so today we move to the next stop on our itinerary: Nazareth. In Luke 1:26-27 in the Message, it says:

**“In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin’s name, Mary.”**

The Nazareth of Joseph and Mary was about 75 miles north of Jerusalem. It was the very definition of a small, nowhere town. A first-century historian lists 45 towns in the district of Galilee, and Nazareth was so small it doesn’t even make the list. It’s speculated that maybe 100–200 people would have lived there at the time. Do any of you come from a town that small?

I was born in Iowa, but mostly grew up in Lebanon, Missouri. Now Lebanon tops out at a whopping 15,000—but when I was there it was closer to 10,000. That’s not really all that small, but outside of Missouri’s tummy, not many people have ever heard of it. I remember visiting other places when I was younger and having conversations similar to this: Oh hi. Yes. Where am I from? Missouri. Oh, you have heard of it, great! Oh. Branson. No. I’m not from Branson. Yes, it’s sort of close. No, I don’t know Yakov Smirnoff. Okay, yes, I did meet him once in a rainy parking lot. He gave me his umbrella. Yes, really. But not in Branson, in Springfield. Oh! You. know Springfield! Oh. No. I’m pretty sure they’ve said it’s not the one in The Simpsons. Have you all had similar conversations in far off places? (Maybe minus my Yakov Smirnoff part—which really did happen right over here at the arena.)

Once when I was in college—which was in the 1990’s—I was on a trip out west with a friend. One day we were in Newport Beach, and I accidentally struck up a conversation with a fella who had traveled “a lot,” but had never been to a city with fewer than a million people. He was fascinated by the idea of a town of 10,000. Again, not *that* small. But still he said, “Do people know how to read there? Do you have like books and newspapers and stuff?”

So, when there's that time in the book of John where adult Jesus is gathering his disciples and Nathanael says, "Jesus of Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?" I can feel that. Yes, people from small towns are still people. We may have different cultural experiences, but there's as much possibility in any one of us as there is in someone from a big city. It's funny the systems we come up with for measuring the likely worth of a person, isn't it? Not funny ha ha, more funny \*bleccchhhh\*.

Rome in our story is the face of oppressive rule. Jerusalem is the battle for hope in the midst of waiting for change. And here comes little Nazareth. A place of simplicity. A place that *IF* it's remembered at all, is only remembered as a disqualifier. Surely nothing worthwhile to humanity could come from there. But. God sees with different eyes. In Nazareth God finds a place where the gulf between heaven and earth shrinks to nothing. Where God can make God's entrance into humanity...

Let's return to Luke 1 in The Message (on page 1028-1029 in your pew Bible or on the screen behind me). We'll start again with verse 26:

**<sup>26-28</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:**

**Good morning!  
You're beautiful with God's beauty,  
Beautiful inside and out!  
God be with you.**

**<sup>29-33</sup> She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured 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.**

**He will be great,  
be called 'Son of the Highest.'  
The Lord God will give him  
the throne of his father David;  
He will rule Jacob's house forever—  
no end, ever, to his kingdom."**

**<sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man."**

**<sup>35</sup> The angel answered,**

**The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
the power of the Highest hover over you;  
Therefore, the child you bring to birth  
will be called Holy, Son of God.**

So, can anything good come from Nazareth? It turns out that the answer is yes. And not just a tepid yes – but a wholehearted yes. Not just *anything* good, but the best good thing that has ever been.

As our guide Rob Fuquay puts it, **"The journey to Christmas goes through Nazareth. This is where God's love became specific. At a particular time, to a particular girl, in a particular place, God chose to become flesh. Who would have thought that a place like Nazareth would be the origin of the Savior of the world?"**

God could have chosen anywhere to make this entrance. Not just Jerusalem or Rome. God could have chosen Alexandria or Istanbul or Chang-an. All commercial, cultural, political hubs. Places where people traveled and did business. Where news spread quickly. Where people wielded tremendous power over others. But God chose a place like Nazareth.

Why? In the Bible, God doesn't explain the choice. It may be as simple as that God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, and Mary happened to live

in Nazareth. But, honestly, Mary is as baffling a choice as Nazareth. She's a young girl. Living in a rural, nowhere place. A place that has surely impacted who she is when she finds herself chosen to give birth to God. We don't hear much about the why of Mary either. Just that God favors her.

We don't hear much about why God chooses Mary from Nazareth. But we do see her response to being chosen. And, maybe there is some clue there. We meet a lot of people in the Bible who, when God chooses them for an assignment, start from a place of no. I can't. I'm too weak. I'm too young. I'm not perfect. Pillars of our faith. Moses. Gideon. David. Jeremiah. They all started from no's. To their credit, they worked through their no's with God and took up their charges. But their first thoughts were of doubt and suspicion and a kind "no thank you." Not Mary from Nazareth though. Hear her response:

Picking back up in Luke 1:38 in The Message:

**"And Mary said,**

**Yes, I see it all now:**

**I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve.**

**Let it be with me**

**just as you say."**

Mary from Nazareth. From nowhere. From no one. Had no hesitations. No self-concern. She was all yes-es and joy! And isn't that what God would want from the announcement of a coming baby? The unfettered joy of an expectant mother?

In one of my favorite passages of writing I've ever come across, Walter Wangerin retells the next events in this story. (pp 32-33 The Manger is Empty)

**“[Mary] jumped from her bed, and giggles tickled her throat. Oh, she clapped her hands and twirled about, and her dark hair flew like a glory around her head. Oh, she was laughing now, for she was going to have a baby!**

**So now there was a blameless, beautiful woman running through the world, the dark world, as fast as she could go. None of the people noticed her go. She didn’t mind. She was grinning and full of good news. South she ran to her friend, her cousin Elizabeth.**

**‘Elizabeth, hello!’**

**Just as the angel had greeted Mary, Mary greeted Elizabeth, and Elizabeth began immediately to laugh.**

**And just as the angel had sung his celestial song for her, she sang a song for Elizabeth.**

**‘My soul,’ sang Mary, ‘magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. He is keeping his promises to us, Elizabeth! I’m going to have a baby!’**

**So then – in the middle of the gloomy world there were two women laughing. They laughed till they couldn’t laugh any more, and then they began to weep for gladness.”**

“In the middle of the gloomy world there were two women laughing.” This sentence. It could be a little throwaway if you weren’t careful. Two women laughing. Big deal. Two no one women from nowhere places. Laughing. Big whoop.

Or, these giggles in the dark. They are the start of the most powerful story in human history. They’re the six-inch deep creek you can walk across in six steps that turns into the Mississippi River. The one domino that’s toppled to

set off the entire Rube Goldberg Machine. The flap of the butterfly's wing that leads to a hurricane.

"In the middle of the gloomy world there were two women laughing." If you give it a moment, can you hear the power in that? The potential? Can you feel the earth shake with what is about to break free? And it all comes through Nazareth. Through Mary.

Why? I'm not sure. We have to speculate. But I think part of it is this right here. That whatever happened in Nazareth to make Mary Mary, she is the one who will greet this news with no hesitation. No frets. No doubts. Just exuberance and giggles. A song. Through her we are assured that this is the long-awaited good news. Through her we see the model of how we can (and maybe should) respond to the Good News. By leaning in and saying, "Yes God, let it be with me just as you say."

And, another part of why Nazareth may be this: the way God exercises power. Pastor and writer Greg Boyd articulates a distinction in the way power can be used. He calls it power over vs power under. Power over is coercive. It does its work with brute force. It wants its own way. Power over is power, and it does its work. But, it is not only coercive, it is corrosive. It is the sort of power that corrupts. You've seen it. It's the power of politics. Of extreme wealth. Of abusive parents or partners. Of legalism. Power over hollows you out. Turns you into a shell. Because in order to continue exerting coercive force you have to dehumanize the people you're exerting your power over. So power over almost always does damage to the people who are subject to it, and also to the people who wield it. God wants nothing to do with power over.

Instead, God chooses power under. I'll let Greg Boyd explain more:

**"[Power under] is the transforming power of humble, self-sacrificial, Christlike love. Exercising power under others is about impacting people's lives by serving them, sacrificing for**

**them, and even being sacrificed by them while refusing to retaliate, as Jesus did.**

**We can think of this kind of power as the power of the cross, as the cross is the ultimate manifestation of the character and power of God.”**

God has every right to exercise power over us. But God has no interest in power over. God has interest in loving us. In seeing us truly liberated, transformed. Jesus’ story will crescendo with power under at the cross. But that story goes through Nazareth. A nowhere town. Not a scrap of power over to be found.

We don’t retell ourselves the Christmas story each year to bury our heads in the sand about the trouble and darkness all around us. Power over is wreaking its havoc every day. And we all see more on the horizon. We are not living in denial by returning to this familiar and joy-filled story. Instead, we are reminding ourselves how God works. How God uses power. How God wants us to use the power we’re offered. We are reminding ourselves that we have the opportunity to say yes to God’s invitations every day. Invitations to serve. Without a pause for self-doubt or wondering if the person we’ll serve will be worthy. It may be tempting to believe that the way to resist power over is to find ways to put together a bigger power over. But that is not the way of God.

The way of God is through Nazareth. Through Mary. Through you and me - however humble our backstory or our hometown. God calls us to take up our parts in this story. To use our power under. And as we do so to remind ourselves that the way of God is not the shout of an order. It’s a giggle in the dark saying, “Let it be with me just as you say.”