

## **Mar 10 – First Sunday in Lent -**

Living on the Margins

Luke 1:46-48, 2:8-12

We're going to spend the next 40 days retracing the life of Jesus as found in the Gospel of Luke, starting today with his birth and ending on Easter with his resurrection. For Lent, I'm inviting you to set a goal of reading through this gospel. We have bookmarks to help you with that goal. I will be having a reflection class each week where we can dig deeper into this week's texts. If you would like to study on your own or with a group I have study notes available in the narthex. Thanks to the Church of the Resurrection for providing some of these resources.

In so many ways the Gospel of Luke is the Gospel of the Nobodies. Jews in the time of Jesus had a name for such people: they were called AM HA'ARETZ—the people of the land. This was a derogatory term for people who were considered ignorant, unclean, or sinners who did not appropriately fulfill the Law. They were outsiders, and often poor and marginalized. There was clearly a stigma attached to them. One of the major themes of Luke's Gospel is God's concern for these people of the land whom pious Jews considered sinners.

The story of Jesus, as recorded by Luke, is centered in the lives of marginalized people. We don't know about Mary's status before the angel came to announce the birth of Jesus, but since she was betrothed to a carpenter she would not have come from a high-status family. The angel Gabriel comes to Nazareth and tells Mary that she is highly favored by God and she is going to have a child. This child will be the long awaited Messiah. But bear in mind what this means. People will whisper about her untimely pregnancy. Her fiancé might break off the engagement. Her very life could be in danger. She will face the hazard of giving birth, potentially the challenge of being a single mom, and though she does not know it, she will see her son put to death at the hands of the Romans at the age of 33. It hardly seems she is blessed or favored by God.

There is a wonderful quote from William Barclay concerning the blessings and favor of God: "The piercing truth is that God does not choose a person for ease and

comfort and selfish joy but for a task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it. Such is the blessing and favor of God.” How many of us want such blessings? How many of us would say, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word?”

Let’s return to this story. You are meant to see God’s heart and character when you hear this story. God could have chosen any young woman in all Israel to give birth to the Messiah. God chose Mary. Mary does not miss this. In her famous prayer, “The Magnificat,” she tells us what all of this means. Listen to a portion of her song: “And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.’” This theme of God choosing and using the disgraced, the scorned, the nobodies, is all over these opening pages of Luke.

Does it seem strange to you that God would choose a poor family to protect and provide for his only son? Why wouldn’t God have chosen a rich family? Why would God have chosen a single teen as a key player in God’s saving plan for humankind? These are the kinds of questions Luke would want us to ponder.

Only Luke tells us of Jesus being born in a stable because there was no room. Matthew does not mention this. Only Luke tells us that Jesus slept in a manger—an animal’s feeding trough. Across the valley from where Jesus was born was a magnificent palace that King Herod had built for himself. He had a mountain made for himself, then had a fortress and palace built atop his man-made mountain. And as King Herod slept in his fabulous bed one night, Mary gave birth in a stable, and laid the King of Kings to sleep in the animal’s feeding trough. This is our King. This is where he was born. What is Luke trying to tell us by describing this story? He is describing the humility of God, and God’s son, and God’s kingdom. This king born in a stable would tell his disciples, “The greatest among you will be your servant.” This is our King.

This birth was announced to shepherds. I want to give you a sense of who these shepherds were. In the first century, shepherds were considered untrustworthy, unclean, and the lowest rung in society. And the lowest of the lowest rung were the

shepherds responsible for protecting the sheep at night. In Luke, these are the people God invited to be there when God's Son was born of Mary in that stable. Why would God choose to alert lowly shepherds to the birth of this miraculous child? Why do God's values seem so different from society's values? Are our own, personal values more in sync with those of God or of our culture?

Who are the nobodies today, the people living on the margins? It is the CNA's who staff our care facilities? It is the wait staff at our restaurants, the young people serving us at the fast food places, or the manual laborers who cut our grass, paint our houses and more? Even if they are making a good wage, they are still people who live on the margins. They are usually one paycheck away from disaster; many cannot afford health insurance, and they are often not respected by society.

As a church, and as individual Christians, Luke wants us to know that to be a follower of Christ is to honor the nobodies, to lift up the lowly, to humble yourself in the sight of the Lord. It is in humbling ourselves, and in lifting up the lowly, that we become most like God, and guard our hearts against the most deadly sin of all, the sin of pride.

This week, prayerfully consider all the "invisible people", many of whom do thankless but essential work for our benefit. Make a special effort to extend your thanks and kindness to all of those who do this work and who may seldom receive any recognition. Think of the people in your lives who have tough, thankless jobs whose work is very important. How can you acknowledge their work and thank them for all they do to serve? How can we reach out to them as a church, not in giving a hand out, but as a partner with them on their journey of life.

Before this happened to them, would either Mary or the shepherds imagined that they were so important to God? Would they have ever imagined that they had a significant role to play for God? Can any of you imagine what God's plan is for you? Are you ready for whatever God sends your way? A plan that requires everything from us, that causes our world to be turned upside down.

In closing let me share just one such story. I read it a few years ago and it has stuck with me. He had just retired and was looking forward to enjoying his retirement. He was at church one Sunday when it was mentioned that the local food bank needed

some help. He thought about it and mentioned to his wife that he might volunteer. After all, it was just one morning a week for a couple of hours. Soon, he began to get to know the regulars. He spent time listening to their stories, hearing about their challenges. Over time that few hours turned into many hours as he not only was at the food bank when it was open, but was soon going to city meetings, and the state legislature advocating for his new friends. It completely upset his retirement plans. He sold his golf clubs, he didn't have time to play golf. He quit having breakfast with the guys; he was too busy. He was honored many years later as age finally caused him to slow down. He wrote, "I never planned for this kind of retirement but when you pray, 'God use me' stand back and enjoy the ride."

Luke wants us to humble ourselves, to see those who live on the margins as valuable fellow travelers of life. Realize God can use them mightily, just like us. How can we say thanks for what they do, support them, and celebrate with them? Realize that some may look at us as the marginalized, the nobodies. How can we accept that and not let pride get in the way of serving? How can we be open to whatever God has next in store for us? Such are the questions and invitation of God that Luke's first verses offers to us, the faithful today.