

Over the last several weeks, I've been looking for something. Actually, I've been looking for several somethings, and that is Christmas presents for my family, our children and my nieces and my brother and sister, and trying to find just the right thing. We went out shopping on the crazy shopping days. We actually went out Thursday evening, on Thanksgiving evening, and by the time that we got to the stores, there wasn't a line outside, because those folks were already inside. Maybe you were there, waiting outside, I'm not sure what your plans were on Thanksgiving, but when we got inside, there were things that were just scattered around the store, and not in their usual place. They're in the aisles here and they're back in the corner, and they kind of make you ... it seems like kind of a scavenger hunt to find what you're looking for.

We found a few of the things that we were looking for, and then, there was a line to get out. At one of the places, we thought, this line just isn't worth it. This thing that we're looking for, it can wait for another day. Not only that, not only looking in person, but also, online. Online shopping is something that I enjoy. I think, if they could just bring it to my house and save myself some trouble, that would be great. But there, it's almost just as hard, because I think, okay, well maybe this is going on sale, or maybe I can wait. So I have to check every day, and sometimes, several times a day, and sometimes several times an hour. I don't know if you guys struggle with this, like I do, but looking for just the right thing.

I wonder, are you looking for something this year? Maybe not just for your presents, I mean, really, what are you looking for? What are you hoping for? What are you searching for this season?

This is the focus of our worship series this month, called SEEK. What are you seeking, who do we seek? Today, we'll begin this journey, and that will take us up until Christmas Eve, the coming of Christ at Christmas. Each week, we'll take a look at some of the stories about the characters of the Bible: those whom God was seeking and those who sought out God, those that were seeking God, seeking the Christ child and some, where God just met them in the midst of their every day life.

Today, we look at the story of the angel, Gabriel, who came to seek out Mary, who was just doing her normal thing, living her normal life. We remember that Jesus' presence is constant and available, but we must seek it out. It was true for those who sought Christ on that very first Christmas, and it's true for us, today. Jesus draws near to those who draw near to him. Jesus promises that when we seek him, we will find him. That's our hope, again, this year, that we'll find Jesus in the midst of these days ahead.

Today, we consider what happens when God seeks someone to be part of God's plan for the world, when the angel Gabriel comes to visit Mary. So where does God go looking for someone to play a central role in the story?

Well the scripture says that God came to Nazareth in the form of the angel Gabriel. Out of all the places in the world, Nazareth is not where you could imagine that God would be looking for anyone. This was a tiny, no-account town there, in Israel, probably less than 100 people who lived there, at the time. Nazareth didn't even make a list of names in the region. When you look to the historians, those who were writing in the day, Josephus, the great historian and general was from the area of the Galilee. He was writing a history. He lists over 40 towns there, in the area, doesn't mention Nazareth, left off the list. When we look to the Hebrew Talmud, it lists 63 towns in the area of the Galilee, doesn't mention Nazareth.

Nazareth seems to be an unlikely place that anyone would go looking for anything, much less God, for a central character in God's story. Later, you remember that when Jesus is calling his disciples, Philip has just been called to be one of Jesus' disciples and he comes to Nathaniel and says this, we find the words in John, Chapter 1. Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, "We've found the one that Moses wrote about in the law, the prophet, Jesus, Joseph's son from Nazareth." Nathaniel responded, "Can anything from Nazareth be good?" Philip said, "Come and see."

Nazareth is an insignificant town, and yet this is where God seeks a young woman to become the mother of the Messiah. This central role in God's salvation story, from the beginning to the end of time, happens here, in this place. How does God do it? God sends an angel, sends the angel, Gabriel. The word angel simply means messenger. It's one who's delivering a message. In this case, it's a message from God. Gabriel is seeking Mary to deliver God's word to her.

We hear those words in the scripture that was read today. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look, you will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and he will be called son of the most high. The Lord God will give him the throne of David, his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever and there will be no end to his kingdom." There will be no end to his kingdom. Can you imagine a message like this? It's news enough to find out that you're pregnant, much less that this person that you're going to be giving birth to is going to be the king, and of his kingdom, there will be no end, be great, be called the son of the most high. He will rule over Jacob's house forever. There'll be no end to his kingdom.

This baby that was to be born is not just the king of an ancient empire or one of the past, this is the crown prince of the kingdom of God. This is who has been announced to Mary, and you remember what kind of kingdom this is. God's kingdom is one in which you love God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength. The kingdom of God is one in which you love your neighbor as yourself. Not only that, God's kingdom is one where you love your enemy, and pray for those that persecute you. You do to others as you would have them do to you. You pay attention to those that you might not otherwise pay attention to. Those that are lowly are lifted up, and those that are high are brought low. This is a place where you love God, and you love your neighbor. This is God's kingdom. We believe that it is coming, here on Earth, and it is came in Jesus Christ, and it will be fully fulfilled in the future. This is the king, this is the prince that is coming here, in Mary.

What kind of king rules a place like this, except one that would go on to give his life on the cross and rise from the grave? This Jesus that was announced to Mary by the angel Gabriel would rule over the kingdom of God, sits on the throne today, and we seek after him, still, now. God has chosen Mary to have this baby.

Mary plays a greater role in the story of salvation than any other human being, except Jesus himself. In Mary, we find a woman who's willing to risk everything to play a role in God's work in the world. During the nine months of her pregnancy, she bears God within herself. Her body is supporting the son of God. When he's born, she teaches him and nurtures him. We don't get much about Jesus' growing up years, but you can imagine, just as a parent or a responsible adult shapes the life of a child, so Mary must have shaped the life of Jesus, instilling in him values, a faith, a love of God, love of neighbor. She helps the son of God grow up, learn how to walk, say his first words, begin to make his way in the world. Yet this was all still ahead, this was yet to come. Mary had no idea. Can you imagine what it might have been like to be Mary in this moment, when the angel has just come to her?

I want you to imagine a story of a Christmas pageant, where there's elementary students, and they've gathered together, and they have to figure out who is going to be what roles in the play. When I was growing up, my cousins and I, around Christmas time, when our family would gather together, we'd all get to act out the Christmas story. One of my aunts or uncles would read the story, or my grandmother, and we'd all have little costumes that we'd put on and play the role. One of the roles, as you might imagine, that everyone wants to play, that every girl wanted to play, was Mary.

I want you to imagine a Christmas pageant in which there's a group of, say, elementary students, and they are there, and they say, "Okay, who wants to be Mary," and all the girls, "Oh, I do, I want to be Mary, I want to be Mary." One is chosen, of course, there can only be one Mary. And they're super-excited about being Mary and then everyone else doesn't get to be Mary, but everyone else has some roles. Finally, they come down to one child, they say, "Well, you get to be a sheep." They say, "What does the sheep do?"

Nobody really wants to be the sheep and everybody wants to be Mary, but do you think Mary wanted to be Mary? She was probably around 14 years old, and you might say, "Now, wait a minute, I thought she was engaged to be married?" Well, she was engaged to be married. The average life expectancy of a woman in those days was between 30 and 35 years old, not a long life. The moment that a young woman was able to have children, she was engaged to be married. Mary is engaged to be married to Joseph. An angel, a messenger, Gabriel, comes to her and says that, "You are going to have a baby, even though you haven't been with your fiance yet." Engaged and pregnant, do you think Mary wants to be Mary?

Mary would have known, of course, that according to the law, the penalty for a woman found to be pregnant outside of marriage, someone who's engaged to someone else, is to be put to death outside the walls of the city. Do you think Mary wants to be Mary? She would have known, of course, also, that at that time, many women died giving birth in those days. She might give birth to this child, and die in the process. Do you think Mary wants to be Mary? She would have known that her family was probably going to make her an outcast.

You can imagine that, even in those days, a 14 year old girl coming home and saying that she's pregnant may not receive a great welcome. She doesn't know who the father is or if she decides to tell the story about how it happened, who's going to believe that anyway, right? You see, all of her hopes and all of her dreams, maybe even her life, was at risk. The decision that she makes when the Angel Gabriel sought her out came to her with a possibility that she might bear the son of God. The angel says, "You're highly favored by God." Is this how God shows favor to people? It doesn't sound like great circumstances. God calls Mary to do something hard and difficult. Is this how God looks on those that God is seeking out? Sometimes, yes.

Sometimes, when God seeks you and I, God has something difficult in mind. It may not be easy. It may not be what we want to do. It may not be what we've always dreamed of doing. It might be dangerous and risky. It might push us out of our comfort zone. We might have to do something that we've never done before. We might have to say hello to people that we would rather not pay attention to. We might have to live in ways that are a little bit outside of our comfort zone, and sometimes far beyond our comfort zone. Sometimes, God is going to ask us to be with people that we don't want to be with, and to go to places where we don't want to go, all for the sake of sharing the light of Christ with those who

haven't heard. We might have to give up what we have so that we can pursue the things that God has in mind for us.

Mary teaches us that this is sometimes how God works. The good news that the angel Gabriel had for Mary is the same good news for us, today. Nothing is impossible with God. Even when what God asks of us is difficult and hard, we can say yes. This is what Mary models for us when she says, "I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me just as you have said."

In the days ahead, I invite you to seek Jesus, both as individuals and as a congregation, that we might see Jesus, that we might find Jesus in places that are unexpected and that we might also seek out others that we might share this good news with. Seek Jesus in the midst of the busyness. Seek Jesus as you go to work. Seek Jesus as you go around your house, as you shop, as you prepare for the days ahead, as you gather with family and friends. Seek Jesus this season.

Because Christmas really isn't about what the presents are. It's not about who you give gifts to or where you're traveling, or who's going to be there or who won't be there. It's about what you're seeking. It's about who you're seeking. When God seeks us, it's about our willingness to say, with Mary, "Here I am, Lord, use me."

Will you pray with me?

We are here, O God. We hear your voice. We know that you're seeking us out and we want to follow you, even if it's scary, even if it's to a place we've never been before. God, please forgive us of our unwillingness, wash us of our sins, fill us with your Holy Spirit. Open our eyes and help us to seek you this season. In Jesus' name. Amen.