

NAZARETH

New Testament Scriptures to Read: Luke 1:26-38, 2:39-40, 4:16-30

Old Testament Scriptures to Read: Isaiah 11:1-5, 61:1-3



Dome atop the Basilica of the Annunciation

The now bustling city of Nazareth extends up the slopes of the hills that once surrounded the small town, and the large dome of the Church of the Annunciation can be seen in the distance as one crests the hill opposite the city. The modern church is the fourth built over the site, preceded by the Byzantine church of 600 A.D., the Crusader church, and the Franciscan basilica of 1730 A.D.

St. Luke recounts the dialogue of the Annunciation in the opening chapter of his gospel. The angel Gabriel greets Mary, “Hail, full of grace; the Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). Where we would expect Mary’s name, the angel uses “full of grace,” an indication of the truth the Church articulates in its doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—Mary is preserved from the stain of sin, “full of grace,” a first fruit and singular gift of the grace that flows from the Cross of Christ. As Gabriel continues, he reveals that God will send forth his Son, who will take on our human nature in order to redeem humanity, “so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-6). Mary is invited to become the mother of the incarnate Son of God. To this call, a call that would include indescribable joys as well as heart-piercing sorrows, Mary gives her “yes,” “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

An event that would change the world forever, takes place unnoticed in the then quiet town of Nazareth, and is remembered in the expansive multi-level Basilica of the Annunciation, whose heart is the small, humble grotto where “the word was made flesh” (John 1:14). This is one of the most sacred sites in the Holy Land because here, as St. Athanasius explained, “the Son of God became man, so that we might become God.”



Lower Church - Grotto of the Annunciation

Later, Nazareth (Greek translation of the Hebrew *netzer* meaning “branch” or “shoot”) became the home of the Holy Family. Jesus would be a Nazarene, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy that a branch (*netzer*) would grow out of Jesse (David’s father) and the Davidic royal line (Isaiah 11:1). In the same town where Mary heard the angel’s words that she

would “conceive and bear a son,” she and Joseph also raise this son, teaching him the prayers and ways of God’s people.



Upper Church



Holy Family Painting

Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus was the "carpenter's son" (Matthew 13:55). Interestingly, the Greek word (*tekton*), which is translated "carpenter," also has the idea of a craftsman who works not only with wood, but also with stone or iron. Given the terrain of the Promised Land, stone was (and still is) a widely used building material. Thus he who will be a new son of David, a new Solomon (recall that David's son Solomon built the first temple), who will build a new glorious temple out of living stones, will grow up learning the craft of one who works with wood and stone.

After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus returns to Nazareth and on the Sabbath he stands up in the synagogue and reads from the scroll of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to proclaim release... the acceptable year of the Lord." He then tells the crowd that "this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus begins his ministry proclaiming a year of release. In the Old Testament, the Jubilee year was to be celebrated every 50 years, and often as the inaugural year of a new king's reign. The Jubilee year brought release from debt and a return of all family lands. Jesus announces a Jubilee release, but his focus will not be on temporal debts, instead he will bring the release from the debt of sin. Jesus is a new Davidic king, inaugurating a new Jubilee year.

It is impossible to number the pilgrims who have come to Nazareth to venerate the site of the Incarnation of the Son of God. One brief but moving account recalls the visit of St. Louis of France who visited Nazareth in 1254 AD with his queen Margaret, after their release from four years of captivity in Egypt. His confessor recounts, "The eve of the Annunciation of our Lady, after sleeping at Sephoris, he put on a hair shirt and went to Cana of Galilee, then to Mount Tabor and arrived the same day at Nazareth. As soon as he came within sight of the holy town, he left the saddle and threw himself on both knees in prayer. Then proceeding on foot in all humility, he came to the holy town and entered the holy place of the Incarnation. That day he fasted on bread and water, in spite of his fatigue. With what devotion he behaved, with what solemnity and splendor he caused Vespers, Matins, Mass and other offices suited to such a feast to be celebrated is attested by several witnesses." May the prayers of St. Louis help us prepare for our visit to this holy site.

Some thoughts for your reflection and *lectio* on these passages and events of Scripture:

- Mary's "yes" is a total gift of self to God's will; a yes that embraced both the joy and sorrows ahead. Am I living this "yes" in my own life?
- Mary and Joseph bring up Jesus in the faith of the people of Israel, memorizing the Scriptures, reciting the prayers and celebrating the feasts of God's people. How am I and my family continuing to grow in the faith?
- With his proclamation of a Jubilee release, Jesus invites each of us to know the joy of the forgiveness of our sins. Have I come to Jesus recently in the Sacrament of Confession to receive this incredible gift?