

# Barre Congregational Church

December 20, 2020: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Fourth Sunday of Advent~

*“The Son of the Most High”*

(Our services can be watched on the church website at [www.barrechurch.com](http://www.barrechurch.com) and Facebook page)

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## Scripture Reading: Luke 1 v 26-38

### I. Introduction:

I was born in a small town in South Africa, about the size of Barre. Kenhardt is situated in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. It is mainly semi-desert area, called the Karoo area, with very little rainfall. It gets extremely hot there during the summer, and the main vegetation one sees for miles and miles is what is called the Karoo bush, a little grey-brown shrub that looks really attractive in its own way, if you like going to the desert. For me as a child, I did not think of Kenhardt as a small town, it was just my town and I was very proud of it. My family decided to move closer to the City of Cape Town, about 8 hours away when I finished second grade. I remember how sad I was to say goodbye to my second-grade teacher and my classmates. So, while life changed a lot for us, for me, as I traveled to many places and then came to the US and settled here, Kenhardt still has a very special place in my heart. It is also the place where my father was buried, and many family members who themselves have moved away, still try to have family reunions in Kenhardt.

So, when I came to Barre a few years ago, I felt at home, because I felt that same feeling of welcome and community life similar to what I feel when I go to Kenhardt. I have watched how many of you know one another, and where I hear the comment, oh yes, so and so can do this for us, because we know him or her for such a long time! Some of you who have asked me why I came to Barre? First of all, I was invited of course, but being in Barre and among you, feels really good. It feels familiar to me.

## **II. What good can come from Nazareth?**

You have heard the question, “What good can come out of Nazareth?” It was a question asked by Nathanael to his friend, Phillip, in John 1 v 46. When Nathanael came face to face with Jesus and Jesus told him that He knew him, sitting under the fig tree, before his friend Phillip introduced him to Jesus, Nathanael exclaimed by saying, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel.” It is a good question to ask in Sunday School or Bible studies...what good can come of out Nazareth, and see what reaction the question evokes, and what discussion follows!

We see in our passage the angel Gabriel appear to Mary, in the little town of Nazareth, and told her she would give birth to a son, and she must call Him Jesus. That is the core of this message. Nothing much is said about her, other than letting the reader know that she is a virgin, from a small town of little significance. We can only imagine Mary’s immediate reaction when she was approached by the angel who told her, “You are highly favored!” She was a bit frazzled about this message because she was just carrying on with her life in Nazareth. But then we see how she started to engage in the conversation with the angel. Her life would change drastically after this interaction.

## **III. The Son of the Most High**

The Angel Gabriel gave Mary a very clear purpose and message. She will conceive a son, and she must name him Jesus. He would be great, because He would be the Son of the Most High. He will be known as the Son of God, before even taking up any functions of Kingship, says David Garland and Clinton Arnold in their commentary on Luke. He will receive the throne of David, the dynasty that was promised by Samuel, and the messianic predictions made in the Old Testament were made about Him. He is the Messiah, and she will give birth to Him. It also means that He will be more important than all earthly kings and powers. He will be uniquely powerful and will fulfill God’s plans for Israel and the world’s salvation. What enormous weight and responsibility placed on this young woman.

So, how will this happen, given that I am a virgin, and do not have intimate relations with Joseph, she questions the angel. His answer is simple and powerful and uncomplicated. Your son will be conceived by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Most High, who is the same Spirit

who has been with the people of Israel throughout their history. The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, protect you and enable this conception. Oh, and your relative Elizabeth, just so you know, has also fallen pregnant at her old age, and she is in her sixth month, because ...nothing is impossible with God. Your Son is already in a relationship with God, and you are an instrument in the hands of God to receive Him and to give birth to Him. God is completely in control of this mysterious occurrence, so you need not worry. All will be fine. This is God's favor upon you, and it is God's will that this happens.

This last part about God being in control must have made Mary feel much more comfortable, because we then see her surrender willingly to the call from God to be God's slave, which in this case does not mean anything degrading, but being a willing and humble participant with God in a historic and holy act for the redemption and salvation of the world.

#### **IV. From a small town to becoming God's instrument**

The town which we as a family finally decided to settle in, is called Wellington. Wellington is about an hour away from the City of Cape Town, and is a beautiful, mountainous area, with exquisite vineyards in the valleys, quite different from Kenhardt. It is quite a bit bigger, with a population of 55,000 plus people, but I consider Wellington a nice small town where many memories have been made, one of them receiving my call to the ministry as the first woman in South Africa's then Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the historically Coloured Church. The church changed its name to the Uniting Reformed Church in SA when it united with the black and Indian churches.

Thinking about my life in these two small towns and how God spoke to me in miraculous ways and called me to be an instrument in God's hands, is so humbling. But to read this story of Mary and her encounter with the angel Gabriel again, is so extraordinary, and I cannot even imagine the feelings, the questions, the awesomeness of the experience must have been for her. She would be the mother of the Son of the Most High! She would raise him, always with the awareness that He was given to her with a special purpose in mind.

## **V. Conclusion**

What is your story in Barre, and how has God spoken to you on your journey? How did your story impact your life in the congregation? How does God still speak to you as you live your life in service to God here at our church?

During a time like this, there are many losses, loss of life, of community, of jobs and security, of movement and more. There are feelings of despair, concern, and separateness from one another. As I was about to finish my sermon, I received a message from South Africa that a close colleague of mine died from COVID-19. I was shocked and heartbroken, because he and I shared the same office for two years at the college we taught. He was a leader in the field of Reconciliation in SA, he was a marathon runner, after he had a heart transplant, and he was an international spokesperson for those with heart transplants. Sure, his must have been recognized as an underlying health condition, but for me he was not just another number or statistic. He was a friend and colleague, and I was wondering how this sermon makes sense during a time like this, where death and dying have become so part of life, on a huge scale?!

I was then reminded by a friend in SA that Christ is our hope, because this Son of the Most High knows what suffering is. He stands inside our situation today, and with the loss comes hope, the hope of eternal life, given to us by the Son of Nazareth. May all of us cherish our precious encounters with the Son of the Most High in our lives and as we approach Christmas, let the town of Nazareth become even more meaningful in our hearts and our minds as we think of Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel. Let us also tell our own stories to one another about God's work in our lives in Barre, and all surrounding towns near and far.

Amen