

MESSAGE: “The Journey to Bethlehem”

Text: Luke 2:1-5

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to embrace God’s providence found in unwanted journeys by following Joseph and Mary’s journey to Bethlehem.

There are journeys we anticipate with joy: sight-seeing trips abroad, vacation adventures at seaside or ski resorts, a walk down the aisle on one’s wedding day perhaps, the return home at Christmastime. And there are journeys we do not wish to take, but find that we must: a trip to the hospital with a loved one in crisis, a march to the principal’s office when you know what you did was wrong, an annual review with a critical supervisor, a journey to the operating room with no guarantee of success. Sometimes we would do almost anything to avoid such a journey. But we are not alone. God is present. And because God is present, the dreaded journey may give way to a miracle in the making...

My message this morning is based in part on Adam Hamilton’s book, *Faithful: Christmas through the Eyes of Joseph*, the profits of which are donated in full to projects benefitting orphans and refugees. In previous messages, we entered Joseph’s story by looking at the encounters and decisions which persuaded him to take Mary as his wife and embrace Jesus as his child. It is likely that he had been prepared to accept injustice and gossip to protect Mary from social, moral and economic ridicule. But after encountering an angel’s encouragement in a dream, he takes Mary as his bride and Jesus as his son. Thus, ‘embracing a child who is not your own’ is found in the genesis of Christmas itself.

Centuries later, a follower of Jesus who lived in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) had a heart for those in need; he was selfless and compassionate. According to one legend, as he approached Christmas he wanted to find a way to honor the birth of Jesus, who gave himself for the world. He decided on a project to find needy children in his community and do what he could to help them. In this, he would emulate the example of the magi who helped Joseph’s poor family by giving gifts to Jesus. You may not know the story, but you know the name: Nicholas, who became a bishop and was eventually canonized as St. Nicholas, the inspiration for Santa Claus.

As we struggle to buy gifts for people who often don’t need them and for children and grand-children who often become exhausted and bored by the end of Christmas celebration, we might do well to remember the inspiration behind gift-giving. Are there children, not our own, who need our help? Are we ready to harmonize the lyric Scrooge sings in *Muppet Christmas Carol*, “With a thankful heart, with an endless joy, with a growing family, every girl and boy will be nephew and niece to me (nephew and niece to me), will bring love, hope and peace to me (love, hope and peace to me). Yes, and every night will end, and every day will start with a grateful prayer and a thankful heart.”

Joseph certainly embraced Jesus as his own and accepted the singular mission to which God called him.

I am deeply moved by those who become step-fathers and mothers or foster fathers and mothers to children in need. Yes, I know there are some who abuse this sacred trust, but for those who accept such a responsibility with integrity, who truly become fathers, mothers and mentors to vulnerable ones among us—well, to borrow the words of O. Henry, “They are the magi.”

As Joseph begins his journey of fatherhood with our *‘in utero’* Savior, he finds himself compelled to another journey that quite frankly, he does not want to take. He must leave Nazareth where his wedding may have taken place and go to Bethlehem, not to visit family, but to register for the emperor’s census and pay the Roman tax. The penalty for not registering was severe; non-compliant senators lost their positions, non-compliant horse-owners lost their horses, but ordinary subjects who refused to register faced imprisonment, confiscation of property, scourging and perhaps slavery.

Joseph has to go, but he is keenly aware that times of occupational requirement are often times of conflict and civil unrest. The Law does not require him to appear with Mary by his side, but, though she is nine-months pregnant, he is likely afraid to leave her behind. Whatever the rationale, they take the journey together, thus fulfilling a prophecy from Micah 5:2: “As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, though you are the least significant of Judah’s forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out of you. His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.” They could not know that magi from Persia would be coming to Bethlehem, in search of Jesus, based on this prophecy.

God works in mysterious ways. If we pay attention, listen and act as the Spirit guides, we often find ourselves in the midst of God’s work here on earth. We call this providence. Joseph and Mary were probably upset about the prospect of traveling the open road with Mary in her ninth month, but God was at work in ways they could not anticipate.

We can trust God’s providence. There may be adverse circumstances in our lives that we do not understand or want, circumstances which God may or may not have intended, but in God’s providence, they have redeeming purpose, healing capacity and potential for miracle. For example, on April 12th of this coming year, the Christian recording artist and song-writer Steven Curtis Chapman will be performing in concert across the street at the East Auburn Baptist Church. I hope to be there.

Steven and his wife, Mary Beth, are parents to three biological children and three daughters adopted from China at the request of their daughter Emily, following a mission trip to Haiti. Like Joseph, they opened their heart to children not their own who became

very much their own. On May 21st, 2008, their son Will Chapman was pulling into the driveway after auditioning for a school musical, while his adopted sister Maria Sue ran to meet him so he could put her on the monkey bars to play. He didn't see her in time and accidentally ran over her.

Steven almost quit his singing career over Mary Sue's untimely death, but he came to believe that is not what Maria Sue or God would want. He recorded an album, *Beauty Will Rise*, as a tribute and testimony of healing. Each of the family dug into his or her faith and trust in God's providence to find a path to healing and forgiveness. They shared their recovery story on *Good Morning America*, *Larry King Live*, *The 700 Club* and in *People* magazine. Mary Beth Chapman wrote a book about the death of her daughter called, *Choosing to See: a Journey of Struggle and Hope*.

At age 54, I, too, can look back on my life and know that though God doesn't cause painful things, God can always be trusted to bring something good from any I endure. I truly believe, "God never wastes a hurt." In their unwanted journey to Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary find God's purposes at work in surprising, yet powerful ways.

According to our guide, Adam Hamilton, there are two routes the holy family may have taken. The more common route, skirting Samaria and its inhabitants, with whom Jews often struggled, hugged the Jordan River. Another possible route followed an ancient roadway called the Way of the Patriarchs. It was shorter and cut through the heart of Samaria. In his parables and ministry, Jesus often championed Samaritans. Could it be that his heart for them came from Joseph who also knew what it was like to be treated as 'less than?'"

We don't know that Mary rode a donkey on the way to Bethlehem, but it is likely. Commentators suggest that the seventy-mile journey would take three days, but given the circumstances and the need to end each day at a water source for the animals, it probably took longer. Several years ago, a BBC journalist walked the route with a donkey and it took him nine days.

To give a sense of what Mary may have been feeling on this journey, Adam Hamilton interviewed an associate pastor in her ninth-month of pregnancy. She offered: "At this point, pregnancy feels very exhausting. I have body aches and nausea and I can't sleep. This is an exciting thing, unlike anything, I've felt before, but it's stressful. Right now I dread riding in a car for longer than 30 minutes. So there's no way (my husband Andy) would be getting me on a donkey! That's not happening. When you look at all the art that shows Mary on the journey, riding her donkey, she's sitting side-saddle and smiling. I would imagine her weeping and at moments screaming at Joseph. Maybe she's a little

moody. I don't imagine it would be so delightful as the pictures portray. I think I'm terrified in a lot of ways. I wonder if Mary felt some of that as well."

This journey was required by an emperor's decree. It was likely uncomfortable, unpleasant and perhaps frightening. In their time, women died in childbirth with a frequency that led to an average life expectancy of only 35. Joseph and Mary would have said good-bye to family right when they needed them the most, but placing their trust in God, they took the journey. The Christmas story we celebrate is the result.

Have you ever been forced on a journey you did not want to take? Maybe it was a divorce, your parents' or your own. Maybe it was an illness, a move or a job re-location. Perhaps it was the death of someone you loved. Often these are not a result of God's will. They just are. But God is with you on the journey, and God's providence can spin miracles from the struggle, pain and disappointment. That's what Joseph and Mary learned from their Bethlehem journey. That may well be the seed of guidance that helped Jesus walk the journeys he did not wish to take, such as the journey to Calvary. What might we learn from our advent journey to Bethlehem?