

HILLS OF JUDEA

Text: Luke 1:39-45

LHUMC 12/15/13

Advent 3/Stations of the Birth #3

I. Introduction

A. Our experience of hiking on the west face (not shore) of Devils Lake in Wisconsin (describe—at the end, we could have gone the three miles back, but Matthew’s map said there was a shortcut.)

1. That experience came back to me as I saw pictures of the Hills of Judea (show picture)

a) I’m not sure I would call these hills—those look more like mountains to me.

b) A lot of exposed rocks.

c) You can imagine the roads through there back then.

d) And so I’ve been picturing Mary on a trail like the one we were on.

e) What made it tough for me was that I’m just not as young as I used to be.

2. As for today’s story, I’m thinking of this pregnant girl on a path like that. Wow!

3. Actually, before we even get to Elizabeth and Zechariah’s house, I’m trying to picture her journey as a whole. I’m having a hard time getting my head around it, to be honest.

a) The map tells us that she went sixty miles over tough and dangerous terrain.

b) Apparently she did it alone.

c) And she also apparently was in a hurry to get there if you believe that first verse that we heard.

d) And I know from experience that rule number one on a rocky trail is to take it slow.

e) I’ve also learned that this week that apart from those issues, that the simple fact of a woman travelling alone like that was pretty remarkable back then to the point of being frowned upon.

f) One historian says this: “(In Jesus’ time) travel for other than religious purposes was often considered deviant behavior...the report of Mary traveling alone into the hill country is highly unusual and improper...” (Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels...*)

4. So to sum it up—this was a remarkable and rocky journey—from one secluded place to another equally secluded place.
 - a) And we shouldn't be surprised--remember I've been telling you that once we left the Jerusalem Temple a couple of weeks ago, we were embarking on a back roads journey.
 - b) In the glove compartment of my car I keep one of those little pocket atlases that show only the interstates and other four-lane kinds of roads. Well, we can throw that right out the window from here on out, because it's not going to do us much good!
 - c) And today Mary is out ahead of us, blazing the trail, perhaps even literally.

II. And so even though I realize we are focusing on the “where” in our look at the stations of the birth, a good part of me just can't get beyond the “why” today. In fact, I'm starting to realize with this story at least, that the “why” and the “who” are the answer to the “where”. The “why” questions are obvious—Why would Mary take such a journey? Why the risks? Why the hurry? As for the “who”—Who she is going to see is critical also. So...before we get to the “where”, let's talk about the “why” and the “who”.

- A. Some have suggested that the reason for her journey was simply to get away from Nazareth.
 1. We talked a little about small towns last week when we were there, but if you've spent any time in a small town, you know how “word gets around”—(a polite phrase for “gossip”) What's the quote? Something like “in a small town, gossip spreads at the speed of boredom.”
 2. Was it simply that there had begun to be whispers and stares and nudges when word got around that Mary was going to have a baby and there was no husband in the picture? Could she not take it?
 3. Would that have been enough to make her hurry off to see Elizabeth?
 4. Personally, I have a hard time believing that.
 - a) I just don't think that someone who already showed enough courage last week to say to the angel Gabriel after he laid out God's audacious plan and call for her life “Let it be with me, just as you say” would be upset by a little gossip.
 - b) Even if she wasn't yet aware of all the ramifications of God's plan for her, she had to have known what her hometown was like.

- c) When she said “yes” to God, at the very least, she would have expected that.
 - d) And as her story continues today and then over the next couple of weeks and we see her continue to fulfill God’s mission for her in even tougher circumstances, it tells me that despite her youth and despite where she came from, if nothing else, Mary had a pretty tough skin.
- B. I really think the journey is much more about where she was going than where she was coming from. And if you read between the lines a little bit, that becomes pretty clear.
- 1. For her to have taken such a journey, she must have heard somehow of the situation with Elizabeth. So maybe a part of it was that she simply had to go and see for herself if it was really true.
 - a) And as we’ll see in the next couple of weeks, this is such a central theme to the whole story.
 - b) On Christmas Eve, when we’re out in the fields near Bethlehem with the shepherds, we will see them leave in just as big a hurry as Mary, rushing off down into town to see if it was really true, what the angels were telling them.
 - c) And then on the Sunday after Christmas, we’ll be in the manger with the wise men, who have come all that way just to see if it was really true.
 - d) And as I ponder all of these instances, I realize that much of the wonder of the story of the birth comes from these people who hear amazing things and instead of giving into the cynicism of the “yeah, right” kind of attitude, they drop everything and head off, just to see if it’s really true.
 - e) And so the question for us becomes one of our willingness sometimes when we sense God coming to us with some kind of good news, even if it the hard-to-believe kind of message, to drop what we are doing, and go to see if it’s really true.
 - f) As I look back at my own life and my own call to ministry, that’s kind of what it was like—I was sensing God doing something, asking something, but it took a while for me to drop everything and take the journey to see if it was really true.
 - g) As Mary shows us, sometimes it takes great faith to take that journey, particularly when we don’t always know what the path will be like when we do. Do you think Mary knew how rocky that path was going to be?

2. And then I'm also wondering if she headed for these hills of Judea because she needed a sense of connection with someone else who was going through what she was.
 - a) One commentator puts it like this—"When everything changes and life gets strange, we need to connect with someone who can empathize, someone who knows what we feel... what both women needed was compassion. They needed a safe place of unconditional acceptance. What they needed was what we often seek in Christ and in each other. They needed care." (Kathi Martin, *Mysterious Visitations* at www.day1.org. December 21, 2003)
 - b) This is one of those stories that among other things, shows us the power of empathy.
 - c) And of course, the child Mary was to have taught us even more about the power of empathy to the point of taking the gift of empathy to its ultimate and eternal heights by taking our pain and brokenness with him to the cross.
 - d) It is also a story that reminds us that when our lives get strange, for good or bad reasons, that we can follow Mary on her journey by knowing that it's okay to reach out to others who know what we are going through. That it is not a sign of weakness to reach out to others for their care and compassion.
3. And then the other thing that is clear is that Mary wanted to share the joy.
 - a) Of all the stops on our journey, this one may be the most openly joyful of them all.
 - b) When you get a baby jumping in the womb for joy, that's some kind of joy!
 - c) When you get an old woman who is six months pregnant crying out with joy, that's some kind of joy!
 - d) When you get Mary breaking into song immediately after today's story, that's some kind of joy!
 - e) And again, that says something to us fellow travelers on the journey.
 - f) In a season when a lot of people struggle to find the joy, even ourselves sometimes, we need to be able to reach out and share the joy like Mary and Elizabeth did.
 - g) We need to remember even when we are hurting that this is a joyful story, one that we are all in together, and that Mary and

Elizabeth in their joy, are offering us strength and compassion through the gift of joy that they share with us today.

III. Conclusion

- A. Finally, I've been also focusing on the actual place there in that village in the hills of Judea where Mary and Elizabeth finally met.
 - 1. The video we saw probably has it right that it would have been in the courtyard just outside Zechariah and Elizabeth's home.
 - 2. As Mary finally reached her destination and approached the house, that's more than likely where she would have found Elizabeth, going about her daily work.
 - 3. So I want to finish in this place.
 - 4. Historians will tell us that in that time and in that culture, the courtyard was the women's place to be—often doing the work that needed to be done, as you saw Elizabeth at the beginning of the video.
 - 5. But it was also a place where women could gather, and shoot the breeze and enjoy each other's company.
 - 6. What happened that day was all of that and more—When Mary and Elizabeth met there that day in that courtyard, they didn't just shoot the breeze, they shared the breeze of the Holy Spirit as they shared the joy of the Spirit working within them.
- B. So perhaps what we remember most about being in this place is that the story can happen even in the everyday places we find ourselves.
- C. That as we go about our daily work and our daily routines, God has a way of finding us and giving us the Good News even there.
- D. That as Elizabeth and Mary experienced joy in the courtyard, so can we, if we are open not just to God's call on our lives, but open to the journey that goes with it, and open to journeying with others who are going through it with us.
- E. Through the power of this story, through the power of God, may we reach out in support to each other as Mary and Elizabeth did, may we share the joy of the season with each other.