

THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM:  
MARY AND JOSEPH

Text: Luke 2:1-5  
LHUMC 12/22/13  
Stations of the Birth #4

I. Introduction

A. Ever felt like a number?

1. Anyone who's ever attended a large state university can relate.
  - a) I remember as a student at WMU back in the day going to drops and adds.
  - b) In the days before computer registration, you had to go to the field house to change your schedule
  - c) And there would be a line snaking all the way around the track.
  - d) Drops and adds were an all-day adventure.

B. Or picture yourself at the Secretary of State office over on Apple Ave.

1. You go in a take your number and realize there are fifty numbers ahead of you.
2. It's so bad that there isn't even a chair free where you can sit.

C. I want you to picture that track or all of those full chairs or anywhere else you have experienced the reality of "numberdom".

1. Because that road to Bethlehem for Mary and Joseph was that kind of thing.
2. In their minds, they were on that road only because they had to be (although as we'll see, perhaps they had to be on that road for a deeper level than what it appeared)
3. They were there because the Emperor of Rome did what emperors occasionally did—call a census, where all families had to go to the father's home town to register.
4. So it's probably safe to say that at that point, Mary and Joseph may have felt like a number.
5. And by register, it wasn't to register to vote—this was a dictatorship, after all.
6. It was to register for the draft if you were a Roman citizen
7. And if were a Jew like Joseph, it was for tax purposes.
8. So picture having to go back to your home town in order to let the IRS know where you are and what you are doing so they can make sure that next year you pay way-to-much in taxes.

Sounds fun, doesn't it? Even more than an hour at the Secretary of State's office!

- D. So picture this latest scene in our Advent road trip.
1. Here is our intrepid traveler Mary again.
  2. Somehow since last week she made it back up to Nazareth, going back on those rocky trails that we talked about last week.
  3. There she has re-connected with her fiancée Joseph
  4. And now she has turned around once more and headed south with him back down to Bethlehem—his home town, not hers—to a place she almost certainly had never been before.
  5. By now she is “great with child”, and we picture her on the back of a donkey—but realize that is only speculation.
  6. In fact, historians suggest that if she was riding on a donkey, it probably wasn't Joseph's since he probably couldn't have afforded one.
  7. If she was on a donkey, it probably belonged to another traveler who out of the goodness of his or her heart loaned it to this couple who needed it more than they did.
  8. But at least she's not alone this time—with her is Joseph, probably still a little bewildered about what he has gotten himself into, because remember he was a little slower than Mary to say “yes” to this whole thing.
- E. And picture this road itself.
1. We know simply from the geography of the Holy Land that the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem was an uphill road, since the elevation of Bethlehem is about 2,000 feet higher.
  2. It was a somewhat desolate road in the fact that there was very little in the way of towns or cities (other than Jerusalem) between those two places. (Picture walking across North Dakota or Kansas).
  3. But it was also no doubt a crowded road, due to the census. There were no doubt a lot of people on the road at the emperor's decree, as evidenced by the fact that when they reached Bethlehem, all the motel rooms were full. Bethlehem was such an out-of-the-way place that that would probably never have happened in normal times. Bethlehem was not a tourist destination, to put it politely. That the road was crowded was both a good and not-so-good thing.
    - a) It was good in that there was a certain safety in numbers—the Nazareth-to-Bethlehem road wasn't one you wanted to

travel alone—the region was famous for roadside bandits that would make it a dangerous trip for solitary travelers. They would have made quick work out of Mary and Joseph if they'd been by themselves.

b) It was not so good in that these travelers most likely weren't happy campers. They weren't on vacation, they were on the road because they had to be—going to register for the draft and/or in order to be charged more in taxes. What a fun trip! Can't you picture a fair amount of first-century road rage going on?

II. So picture this place—this road. A rocky road, an uphill road, and not just geographically speaking. Trudging along this road, picture a nine-months pregnant girl and her kind of clueless fiancée. A man who meant well, but hadn't been through anything like this before. So even if the road had been all downhill, it still would have been uphill for them. What I'm realizing is this road stands for so much in this story. This road is a symbol not just for what God had in mind for the story, but for the child that was about to be born. And this road still symbolizes what the story and the child can mean for us and our lives.

A. The first thing I'm realizing is that this road is a symbol for inequality and injustice.

1. Think again about the “who” and the “why”.
2. Think about what it means that a young Jewish couple—completely powerless, completely unknown to every government official from the emperor on down, are having to make a journey on this road at the whim of the most powerful.
3. The inequality symbolized by this road takes us back to the song of Mary right before this, when she sings to Elizabeth that in the Kingdom that her child will bring about, the powerless will be raised up and the powerful brought down.
4. This road symbolizes that as it hadn't yet happened at the time of Mary and Joseph's journey, it still hasn't happened.
5. This road reminds us that in our world where the rich keep getting richer and the poor get poorer, where there is the 1% and the 99%, and that there is still a huge divide between the powerful and the powerless, that roads are still being built to keep that status quo.

6. And most of all, this road perhaps forces us to look at who we really identify with in the story and what kind of roads we are building and traveling.
  7. William Willimon wrote an article that he entitled “Christmas in the Empire”. In it, he describes a come-to-Jesus moment when he realized which road he was on: “If I have a place in this story...(I’m realizing that ) my place is in Rome with Caesar Augustus, or maybe in Jerusalem with King Herod...I’d rather see myself as one of the relatives of Mary and Joseph, or at least among their friends, if they had any, together around the manger that night in Bethlehem. I wouldn’t even mind being one of the shepherds, out working the night shift, surprised with the heavens filled with angels...But alas, that is not my place in the story. My place in the story is as a member of the Empire. I don’t live in a palace, but I live in a home that—with its modern conveniences and security-- the majority of the world would call a palace. I’m not a king, but I certainly have more control over my life and more control over a number of people than most of the kings who have walked the earth in the past...I don’t like my particular place in the story of the first Christmas...” (*Pulpit Resource*, October-December 2006, pp. 58-59)
  8. Perhaps the road to Bethlehem can help us look at what kinds of roads we are building and traveling as we continue to discern our own place in the story.
  9. Hundreds of years before today’s scene, in a time of great inequality and injustice in Israel, Isaiah talked of the need to “make straight in the desert a highway for our God”. My hunch is that he was talking about a very different road than that road from Nazareth to Bethlehem.
- B. This road is also a symbol for inconvenience.
1. I’ve never been pregnant, but I’m pretty sure that if I had been Mary, nine months along, this road trip would have been the last thing I would have wanted to do.
  2. Some of you who have been pregnant might be able to tell stories of forced labor that brought about the pains of labor.
  3. This is one of those kind of stories.
  4. It would have been so much easier for them just to stay home to have the baby.

5. Mary probably would have known the village midwife, would have had a place in their home all set up as a nursery, etc, etc.
6. Who would ever choose to travel sixty miles when nine months pregnant and then to have a baby in a stable?
7. But the emperor had other plans (or was it God?—more on that in a minute)
8. As they took off on that forced journey, this road became a symbol for any time we think we have God and God’s plan for our lives all figured out.
9. It’s a reminder that sometimes God’s plan for us can be more than what we bargained for—that it may involve a journey that would be a lot easier not taking, if it’s all about taking it easy.
10. It’s a reminder that sometimes playing a part in God’s story is just plain inconvenient.
11. Actually, the whole story of Mary and Joseph and all of their journeys can be seen as a series of inconveniences—it would have been so easy for both of them just to check out at the beginning of the story and just stay home.

III. And then the other thing that this road reminds us of, beyond the injustice and inequality and the inconvenience is the inevitability of it all.

- A. We don’t know if Mary and Joseph were familiar with the words of the prophet Micah.
1. And even if they were, I’m not sure that would have made their journey any easier.
  2. But here is the quote—“ But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you will come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel...and he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord...and he shall be the one of peace.”
  3. You read that, and you picture Mary and Joseph on the road to Bethlehem not just as numbers, not just as a couple forced by royal decree to take a trip they would have been better off not taking, but as fulfillers of prophecy.
  4. And when you read it like that, you realize that they had to wind up in Bethlehem. There was no other place in which their child could be born.
  5. And if that’s really true, then it raises all kinds of other interesting questions such as:

- a) Was God using the emperor and his census as part of His plan for the world?
  - b) And if so, does God ever still use earthly rulers and their decrees as part of His plan?
  - c) If that is true, then are we also getting a comment already about how different this new ruler soon to be born was going to be from what the world knew rulers to be like?
  - d) And in terms of our own lives, is it possible for us to live out God's plan even as we go about the requirements that we have to fulfill as citizens of this world?
  - e) Is this story telling us that like Mary and Joseph, we always have our feet in both worlds—that while we are citizens of this world, we are also always citizens of God's Kingdom as well?
  - f) I remember a few years after this when someone asked Jesus about whether his disciples should pay taxes. And his answer was something like “render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's”
  - g) Spoken like someone who had taken this journey down the Bethlehem road.
  - h) For Mary and Joseph in a very real sense were rendering unto Caesar what was his and were soon to give to the world what was God's.
- B. In the end, it's my hope that this station of the birth reminds us that even when we are fulfilling our roles as citizens of this world, that it's also always about fulfilling our part as members of God's world.
- C. May God be with us on our earthly journeys, as frustrating and meaningless as they seem to be sometimes.
- D. As we take a number, wait in line, render unto Caesar's what is Caesar's, may this Bethlehem road remind us that the most important journey we are on is God's journey.
- E. May that perspective empower us as we travel all of life's roads.