

“Going to Bethlehem”

December 20, 2015

4th Sunday of Advent

Journeys that we don't want to take. Sometimes they are literally from one place to another. Sometimes they are emotional - when we suffer a loss or we're hit with difficult news. These journeys are unwanted, inconvenient, and anxiety-producing, but they are a part of living.

Mary had gone from Nazareth to visit Elizabeth in Ein Karem, and then back to Nazareth. We assume that she and Joseph were married after she came home to Nazareth. They probably stayed near family because of her pregnancy. But when they have to return to Joseph's home in Bethlehem because of the census - because the Roman government wants to collect taxes - they make the journey together. They had to go.

Luke gives us the historical setting because he wants us to know that this is for real. God came to dwell on earth. Emmanuel - God with us - is a real thing - not a hope or a dream, but a reality.

But Luke is also clear to tell us that nothing is convenient here. The Roman government didn't care that Mary was close to giving birth. There was not a birthing suite for her to use - no whirlpool to ease the pain of contractions, no sort-of comfortable bed, no number to call to order food, no nurses, no in-room TV or iPod to play music. I wonder what her prayer was and how she felt. And the journey wasn't easy. The first few days were fairly flat, but the terrain became hillier as they continued.

Scholars have differing opinions, but it's possible that Mary and Joseph ended up not so much at an inn. More than likely, it was more of a guest room in a relative's home. With all of the people coming to a larger town like Bethlehem, other family members would've been seeking out a place to stay, too.

Now a guest room might sound nice, but think of it more like a garage area. (SHOW IMAGE of HOUSE) Upstairs was the sleeping area; downstairs was the daytime living area and also a space where animals came in for the night - not incredibly clean, not a place you'd like of to give birth. Whether it was to give Mary and Joseph privacy as she birth, or whether it was to keep Mary separated from others because she was giving birth, the situation isn't what we might choose. Listen to Mary's re-telling...

MEDIA: “THE FIRST CHRISTMAS - MARY”

Mary reminds us that God's promise is fulfilled in Jesus. Her baby would change everything. He is the One who will redeem the world. He is the One who will make a way to God and bring forgiveness. But the journey Mary and Joseph traveled - from

hearing the news of the birth of Jesus and their part in it to traveling to Bethlehem to raising this child - God's Son - wasn't easy. Their journey had detours that they didn't expect. They ended up in a place they didn't plan on welcoming Jesus, the Messiah, in a garage.

Even though Mary probably wanted her family there to help, even though Joseph might have been scared, Jesus was born. For the loneliness and discouragement we might feel, even when we don't feel right at home, even when we don't feel ready, God comes to be with us! Pastor Adam Hamilton reminds us that "God promises that in the midst of the animal dung and the noise and the disappointment, God is at work!"

The promise of our faith isn't that Jesus takes care of everything. To say that is a trite and dishonest response. I felt that this week when I heard that my grandma died. Believing in Jesus doesn't mean that we won't face the reality of grandparents who grow older, fall down and break bones, and struggle to recover. Believing in Jesus as Savior doesn't mean that we won't ask questions about "why?" or that we won't hurt when our loved one dies. Believing in Jesus and following him doesn't "fix" our life. It doesn't give us a free pass from pain or grief, but it does change our perspective. It may not change the situation, but it changes how we live in it.

Just as Mary expressed, Jesus does change everything because when we seek to follow him, we are different. We do his will rather than our own. We're not left to our own ways of self-indulgence, instant gratification, and living for ourselves. Let's be honest - it's easy to stay there - to go after what we want when we want it, how we want, without thinking of anyone else.

We're called to deny ourselves, to wait for the Lord, to live for others and sacrifice for others. We're called to care about other people without taking a poll to see if they deserve it or not because Jesus is Emmanuel - God with us. We're called to make sure that others have what they need even when we have stuff that we want. Jesus changes us. We do everything we can to show that the love of God is real and wonderful.

A friend on Facebook posted a story this week. Her daughter was singing "The Virgin Mary had a baby boy," only she was singing, "Urgent Mary had a baby boy..." My friend corrected her - "it's actually "Virgin" Mary." Her daughter replied, "Oh, I like "Urgent" Mary, because we need Jesus urgently."

She's right! We need Jesus urgently! Our journey of faith may feel like we're on solid ground. If that's where you are today, praise God! How do we praise God and share the joy of trusting in God? Tell someone that you're going to church on Christmas Eve and you want them to come with you. Don't let this season take over without

spending some time thinking about your journey and praying about how you might follow God more closely.

Maybe you're one who feels like you're walking uphill all the time with lots of dead ends or detours or unexpected stops. Mary and Joseph's road to Bethlehem wasn't without surprises. And it was only a beginning for them. How will you keep on trusting in God who is at work to redeem and to save even when you struggle to believe it? Will you pray and share the journey with others so that you will be encouraged and strengthened? Again, Mary and Joseph were not alone. Yes, they claimed God's promises to them, but they also had each other.

May you know the blessing of God's presence and power on the journey. Thanks be to God. AMEN.