

12/10 - "The Journey of Mary and Joseph"

Luke 2: 1-7

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)

3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Special Music: "Journey to Bethlehem" Steven Curtis Chapman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHiwpSFNQ3o>



A INCONVENIENT JOURNEY

There are journeys we take
Because we must,
Dragging our heels
And kicking up dust.
Journeys taken in frustration,
Born from unwanted obligation.
We fill the perceived apparent need
Of our shallow masters
Who fail to perceive
The burden of such travails.
Woe to the beggar,
The blind or the lame.
Woe to the challenged,
Or to those who lay claim
To unreasoned alibis,
The sick and disenfranchised,
Unseasoned fossilized
Walking relics of systemized neglect.
Woe to those in their home
Who simply wish to be left alone,
But are forced to travel,
Their lives unraveled,
Simply to be counted,
For purposes confounded.
Woe to the woman
Found great with child,

Forced from her home
Unreconciled
By the legalities
And frivolities
Of men who think themselves God.
Lower your eyes
To those who can be blamed,
Ignored and estranged,
Left unnurtured by shame.
Smothered in pain.
Open your eyes, you governors of man.
Take a moment to rethink your plan.
For there is no humanity
With wills based in vanity,
The blank canvas of sanity
And vessels of profanity
That step on the necks
Of the people they serve.
Oh, my children,
We so deserve better,
To be released from the fetters
That chain us to dogma.
And here,
God takes our desperation
And total aggravation
And uses this moment
To bring light through God's smile,
A spotlight on salvation, born as a child.

About fifteen years ago, I found myself in a quandary. My company had shelled out a great deal of money for me to attend a week-long conference in Las Vegas. This wasn't anything new. They usually did this a couple of times a year. But this particular conference was more expensive than some conferences in the past. The conference was located at the MGM Grand on the strip. And since the conference was there, the company reserved a room for me there as well, thinking that being in the same hotel as the conference would more than make up for the cost of having to pay for taxis and Ubers, or rely on the bus. Little did they realize that there was free rail transportation from several less expensive hotels that would have brought me right to the conference center's doors.

The week before I was to fly out to Vegas, a very odd thing happened to me. While I was sleeping, I got a Charlie Horse in my left leg calf. Everyone has had them a Charlie Horse at some time or other and knows how very painful they can be. I got out of bed and tried to walk it off. The muscle did eventually loosen up, but I still had a great deal of pain in my heel. Over the next few days, the pain got steadily worse, until I could no longer stand it. I decided that I needed to go to a doctor to see what was wrong, but I couldn't decide which doctor I should go see. Eventually, I settled on a podiatrist thinking that they could at least point me in the right direction.

At the podiatrist office they took multiple x-rays of my foot. Then they turned around and took some more. By this time, I was totally confused. Finally, the doctor called me back to an exam room where my x-rays were already up on the light board. He asked how I had hurt my heel and I told him about the Charlie

Horse. He looked at me, then looked at the x-rays, then back at me. I knew that I hadn't done anything wrong, but I was starting to feel very self-conscious. The doctor sat down in a chair and carefully examined my foot. Then he gave a little nod and said matter-of-factly, "Well, Mr. Wellborn, you appear to have broken your heel bone. It's very uncommon but not completely impossible. The Charlie Horse that you experienced was so severe that it cracked your heel in several places." With that, he bound my foot in an ace bandage, fitted me for a walking boot, got me a new set of crutches, gave me a prescription for pain meds and said I should start to feel better in about six weeks. I was to wear the boot anytime that I was not in bed.

I had not expected this. I was headed to Vegas and had no way to change my plans. There was no one to go in my place. And then I thought that at least I would be staying in the convention hotel. Little did I know how large the MGM Grand was. When I got to my room, I took time to figure out how far I would have to walk each day to attend the conference. To my chagrin, it turned out that the walking distance from my hotel room to the convention hall was over a mile, and that was without ever leaving the hotel.

This was at the time that those marvelous leg scooters had just come out, but my insurance would not cover one. For a whole week, I was forced to walk that mile to and from the convention center. It was one of the longest and most painful weeks of my life. By the time I would get back to my room, I was so worn out that there was no way for me to enjoy the sights.

Sometimes in life, we are required to go to certain places, even when we aren't up to it. Sometimes we are required to deal with people who make decisions regarding our lives without discussing those decisions with us. Sometimes people expect us to live up to the old adage, "Ours is not to question why. Ours is but to do or die." People may empathize or find sympathy with our situation, but that does not change the fact that we still need to "get 'er done."

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3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

Joseph wasn't planning a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He wasn't planning on having to take that trip with his pregnant fiancé. He wasn't given a choice. Ceasar Augustus had decided to count the number of people in the Roman Empire and make sure the government was getting its fair share of taxes. For some reason, Augustus felt this could only be done if everyone traveled to their ancestral home and registered. Joseph was from the house of David and David's home was Bethlehem, so Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to

Bethlehem just so they could register to be counted. And before we twist our brains in a knot, we should remember that Mary was also descended from the house of David.

Joseph saddled up a donkey so that Mary did not have to walk in her condition. It is seventy miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem as the crow flies. Traveling by car today, this would take us a little over an hour, but a donkey could only cover about twenty miles a day which meant that the trip to Bethlehem was going to take four days, assuming no delays. Four days really wasn't that bad of a trip in those days. Four days traveling on a donkey while being ready to deliver a child must have made that trip excruciatingly long. And then to arrive and find out there was no place to stay but in the stable. That had to be discouraging. After all, they really hadn't wanted to make the journey in the first place. They just didn't have an option.

I listened to a short message from another pastor the other day. In the message, she chastised ministers who try to draw life analogies out of historical stories in the Bible. She made examples about looking at stories, like Jesus walking on the water and trying to apply that reference to our lives of how Jesus carries for us through the storms in life. Or taking the story of Jesus healing the blind man and then applying it by saying that Jesus removes our darkness and replaces it with light. While I find some validity in her statement, (Yes, we as ministers can sometimes draw some questionable analogies from historic events), I also know that Jesus not only referred to parables but also life stories to present a clearer picture of the Kingdom of God. I truly believe that we can

find clarity of purpose by seeing how others live their lives and their impact on the world around them.

Let's be honest. I doubt any of us are ever going to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, or even seventy miles here in Texas, on a donkey while pregnant. But that should not preclude us from trying to understand how this event can be perceived as an inspiration in our own lives. Is it so strange that we seek ways to look at this story and find inspiration on how we can better serve God in a chaotic world that often expects us to comply, even at times when it seems almost impossible for us to do so?

We often ask the wrong questions, because the wrong questions seem so obvious to ask. We want to question Augustus' judgement, because we believe that what he was trying to do didn't really make a lot of sense. After all, the number of people doesn't change just because they are told to go to their ancestral homes to be counted. Wouldn't it be easier to just to count everyone where they were? Our questions seem to revolve around the people who have influence over our lives.

Joseph could have jumped up and down, screamed and shouted, threw a fit and in the end have done the very thing that was expected of him. Such a reaction is extremely detrimental to one's life. Joseph could have yelled at God saying, "Why are you making Augustus send us to Bethlehem? Surely you can get him to change his mind. If you loved me, you would make him change his mind because this is all so ridiculous. And don't forget how hard this will be for Mary." Don't tell me that your prayers never drift into this kind of a conversation

with God. “God, how could you let that person become president? God, why did you allow the state to make this stupid law? God, why have you put people in my life that constantly argue with me?” I’m not saying that we do this all the time, but aren’t there those moments when we throw up questions like this to God, even though we know that he isn’t responsible for forcing any of this on us?

Shouldn’t we be asking God questions like, “God, what kind of lesson can I learn from this situation. God, how do I take my mind off the world’s demands and focus on the responsibilities that you have given me? God, how can I better example the love, grace, and mercy of Jesus to the people around me through this challenge in my life?”

We have a tendency to ask God, “Heavenly Father, why don’t you fix this?” And God responds back to us, “Funny, I was about to ask you the very same thing. After all, you are my hands and feet in this world.” Is it really such an impossible task to meet the demands of being a decent human being, while still being open to the teachings of God and the Spirit moving through us? Is it so hard to understand that the latter will help us become not only better, more perceptive human beings but also better and more perceptive children of our Creator?

The challenges that we face make us stronger, more compassionate Christians, and guide us in helping our neighbors. It brings a broader understanding of the nature of the human condition as we experience a world hell-bent on destroying itself.

Each one of us has two ways in which we can look at our circumstances in the world.

1) We can focus on the world itself, attempting to mold it into something more bearable to our own personae and then stand before our Maker and tell him what a wonderful job we did.

....or

2) We can focus our souls on listening to God as he tells us what he wants us to fix and how to fix it. At which point, we once again can stand before our Creator and let him call us his good and faithful servants.

I am about to say something that some people find extremely hard to hear. Sometimes... Sometimes God uses the events and situations caused by others to bring us to a place where we are better able to serve God.

Let me repeat that:

Sometimes... Sometimes God uses the events and situations caused by others to bring us to a place where we are better able to serve God.

God didn't necessarily cause Ceasar Augustus to enact this law forcing people to return to their ancestral homes. But God did know what Augustus was about to do and God used it to his advantage to get Mary and Joseph where they needed to be. God didn't force Joseph to hit the road with Mary on a donkey, but he did make it possible for everything to play out the way it needed play out. He provided Joseph with an opportunity to follow his lead. And Joseph, listening to

voice of God and the voice of an angel, followed the path that allowed everything to come together at the perfect moment.

God never forces us down a path, but instead allows us the opportunity and encourages us to follow his lead. But if our eyes are not focused on him, we won't know where he is encouraging us to go. As Christians, we shouldn't look at this world for the encouragement that we need to do the right thing. Such blind obedience to the ways of humankind will always point us in a direction that will leave us bowing down to our own desires rather than fulfilling the purpose that God has set for us, (which, by the way, means we also miss out on the blessings that he has waiting for us both along the way and at the end of our journey).

There are several take-aways from this message that I want us to ponder this week. And I also know that it is difficult to examine these statements because they will make us all uncomfortable. They will leave us feeling somewhat out of control, tossed about in the wind. And humans that we are, we really are more comfortable when we feel we are in control.

- 1) God always knows what path we should be on and our ultimate destination. We don't. So, we need to listen for his voice and allow his Spirit to guide us.**
- 2) God always knows who we will meet along the way. We don't. But we are responsible for how we treat those that God has placed on our path, laying our prejudices and pride aside as we meet their needs.**

- 3) God planned from the beginning what our purpose was to be. We didn't. Our purpose is the product of the same God who created the heavens, the earth, and each one of us. He knows the number of hairs on our heads.
- 4) God always knows what is best for us, even if we don't. We may think we do. But we really don't. The best thing we can do is to:
- a. open our ears to his voice,
 - b. open our hearts to his spirit,
 - c. open our eyes to his love,
 - d. open our minds to his teaching
 - e. open our hands and feet for his purpose,
 - f. and open our spirits to his grace, joy, and mercy

Just as God will never force us to comply with his will for us, we are fools to think we can bend God to our will. If we choose to accept his mercies and blessings in our lives, it can only be through our contrite hearts and souls.

6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

I know that it is uncomfortable to not know where God is taking us. The comfort is in knowing that he walks beside us on the path he has set for us. But I

can also tell you this, at the end of the path that God has placed us on, we will always find a sleeping baby in a manger.

God bless you all!

AMEN

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