

“From Nazareth to Bethlehem”

Date: December 21, 2014

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Luke 2:1-7

Occasion: Advent 4, series “The Journey”

Theme: God’s presence, redeeming our stories

It was probably during Mary’s stay with Elizabeth in Ein Karem that Joseph visited from nearby Bethlehem and learned that Mary was pregnant. We can imagine how he felt, and we are reminded that God is often profoundly at work in those times when we’re confused, broken or wounded.

When Joseph returned to Bethlehem, he had a dream in which God’s messenger confirmed Mary’s story and called Joseph to accept Mary, and to be the father of her child. He was to raise Jesus as his own son. Joseph awoke from his dream, went back to Ein Karem, and agreed to take Mary as his wife.

Joseph and Mary made the nine-day journey back to Nazareth, where their wedding was hastily planned and the two were soon married. It was not unheard of in those days for an engaged couple to be found pregnant before the wedding day.

The fact that they were formally engaged meant, that for legal purposes, they were already married. Thus, a pregnancy after the formal engagement was less scandalous than a pregnancy where there was no formal engagement as yet.

More than likely, they remained in Nazareth after the wedding, a reasonable supposition, considering Mary was five months pregnant by now. It also allowed Mary’s mother to be nearby and would have given Mary an opportunity to use a midwife she knew.

In the ninth month of Mary's pregnancy, Roman soldiers arrived in Nazareth to announce that the emperor had commanded a census and that every Jewish family must return to the husband's hometown to be counted. The census was for the purpose of levying taxes, and thus it is likely that the Romans wished for all families to return to the location of their property.

Joseph's property, that is, Joseph's portion of his father's estate and the carpentry business they may have shared, was in Bethlehem. Mary, being the wife of Joseph, was now a part of his family. She was bound to return with Joseph to his hometown of Bethlehem.

What do you think Mary was feeling when Joseph told her that even though she was nine months pregnant they both would have to take that long, 10-day journey back to Bethlehem? Adam Hamilton imagines Mary praying something like this:

"God, how could you? You came and asked me to bear this child and I agreed....I took on the shame that went with a hurried marriage, enduring the looks and whispers as I walked by people in the community. And now, I won't be able to have my baby in Nazareth? .... What did I do that was so wrong? ... How can you let this happen?" (p. 88)

Have you ever felt this way toward God? Have you ever found yourself so profoundly disappointed that all you could do was cry out in anger to God, or weep, or both? The Gospels don't tell us this is how Mary felt. They tell us nothing. We're left to imagine, to put ourselves in Mary's sandals and to imagine what she felt.

But what is a mother, nine-months pregnant, a jumble of hormones going to feel when she hears that the one thing she

thought she could control was now being stripped away from her? Yet, regardless of what she felt, Mary and Joseph were *forced* to travel to Bethlehem. And Mary would give birth in a stable.

Joseph and Mary, after a long and difficult journey, finally reach Bethlehem. Luke tells us only that “while they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.” (2:6) We don’t know if she began going into labor upon her arrival, or if they had been there for several days before she felt the first contractions.

Now, we typically think of the story in this way: Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem, and Joseph, being a typical guy, has not made reservations at the local inn. The city is brimming with visitors, and hence there is no room for them in the inn. The innkeeper offers them space in the stable, and it is *there* that the baby is born.

This is the version of the story that most of us have grown up with, and parts of it are certainly true. Mary did give birth in a stable, and she laid the Christ Child in a feeding trough. However, there is some debate about whether Mary and Joseph could find no room in the inn, and for that matter, whether it was an “inn” at all.

If you’ve been with us for this study from the beginning, you may have asked yourself the question, in week two of Advent, “Why would Joseph and Mary have needed to stay at inn, anyway? If this was Joseph’s home town, why didn’t they stay with his family?” It’s a great question, and the answer changes how we read the story.

The Greek word that is translated in most versions of Luke’s Gospel as “inn” is *kataluma*. The only other time this word is used in the Gospels happens when Jesus sends his disciples ahead to find a room they can use for their Last Supper together.

That room, you will remember, was not a room at an inn, but a guest room in a house. This is the more accurate translation of *kataluma* – it is a guest room. It's not an inn. It's a guest room. It may be helpful at this point to see what a simple first-century home looked like.

This picture is based on the archaeological remains of a first-century home. There would have been a central room that served as kitchen and living area. Off of that room would be the sleeping quarters, where parents slept. Typically there would be a guest room where children slept, but which yielded to guests when there was company. This was the *kataluma*.

When there were guests, the children slept with the parents or in the main living space. There was also a stable, or a small barn – think of it as a garage – that was either behind the home, or in the case of homes built over caves, beneath the home. The stable protected the animals from predators and thieves at night.

Assuming that Joseph's family was of modest income, they would have had *one* guest room. The guest room might hold bed mats for six people, sleeping side by side. Here's the question: How many of Joseph's extended family were in Bethlehem because of the census? If Joseph had four or five siblings and each of them had family, it is easy to see why there would have been no room for them in the *kataluma*, or guest room.

But there's another reason why Joseph and his wife may have been given the stable instead of the guest room. According to Jewish Law, a woman's menstrual blood, or the blood and water at childbirth, would have caused her to be ritually unclean.

Further, anything she touches, or anything she lies upon becomes unclean. Anyone who touches anything she lies on becomes unclean. You begin to see the problem with Mary giving birth in the guest room where others would have planned to sleep.

It seems likely, then, that Joseph's parents would have set up a birthing room in the barn to give Mary and Joseph privacy, and to keep everyone and everything in the house from becoming ritually unclean. For a poor family with limited resources, and only a single guest room, the stable may have been the best option possible.

Even still, I imagine Mary sat on the birthing stool thinking to herself, "This was not how it was supposed to be – giving birth in my inlaws' barn." But still, God was with her. God is with each of us, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

This was a journey Mary did not want to take. The birth was not the way she imagined it would be. And of course, this was not the last of Mary's unwanted journeys. Thirty-three years later there would be a journey to terrible hill, where she would see her son nailed to a tree.

You and I, we will each take unwanted journeys in life. I think of those who have been laid off of work; those who are battling cancer; a family whose child has struggled with drug or alcohol addiction; spouses who have partners who have cheated on them or left them; parents who have lost children. You know plenty of others, I'm sure.

Life is filled with heartaches. But the good news of Scripture is that God not only walks with us on those journeys, God redeems them and brings good from them. The Bible is filled with such stories.

Jacob's son, Joseph, is sold as a slave by his brothers, then wound up in Egypt, falsely accused and thrown into prison. But that was not the end of Joseph's story.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were told to bow down and worship the Babylonian king's image. When they refused they were thrown into a fiery furnace. But that was not the end of their story.

The people of Judah were taken captive and marched to Babylon, where they would live in exile for fifty years. But that was not the end of their story.

And the child born in a stable in Bethlehem would walk to Calvary. But that would not be the end of His story.

All of us take unwanted journeys, but God always walks with us on these journeys. God works through them and redeems them, and these difficult journeys will never be the end of our story!

I invite you, regardless of the journey that you are on, to trust, to have faith, and to hope that *your* difficult journey will never be the end of your story, because God is by your side.

Invite God to use your disappointments to accomplish God's purposes. It was just such hope, I believe, that kept Mary going on that long, difficult journey to Bethlehem. Amen.

Adapted from Adam Hamilton's book "*The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem.*" Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011. pp. 83-103.

