

Journeying

Isaiah 55:6-13

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 2:1-5

December 13, 2015 Advent 3 series of

Most of the years of my childhood and youth, we lived fairly near Ottumwa, Iowa, the town where I was born. My grandparents—my mom's parents—lived there, and we returned there almost every year for Christmas Eve with my grandparents and various aunts, uncles, and cousins. We'd load up the car with the presents to be shared, and ride, maybe 25 miles, maybe 50, maybe farther, depending on where we were living at the time, and drive past Iowa farmland to get to the little square white house on Albia Road. It wasn't a great expedition, but it was something we did every year. Being an only child, I'd ride alone in the back seat, with holiday thoughts going through my head. We'd arrive, and my grandmother would make a wonderful holiday supper; and we'd gather around to enjoy it. I was the oldest grandchild. Besides us and my grandparents, my mom's oldest sister, Betty, would arrive with her husband and their two children—they were Jewish. Then my mom's kid sister, Arzie, and their children, one, two, then three, then four, would arrive—they were Roman Catholic. We were a good ecumenical bunch. After the dinner would come an agonizing wait for us all to dig into the presents, then we'd drive home late at night, me snoring in the back seat.

It wasn't exactly a Hallmark Christmas Movie scene, but it had its moments. Do you remember Christmas journeys? Maybe family homecomings like mine? Maybe shopping trips to downtown St Louis to buy presents at Famous Barr or Stix, Baer and Fuller—and more important, to see what was in their windows? Maybe you remember, like I do, trips into the woods to find your own Christmas tree? Maybe you remember longer journeys, like trips home for Christmas on military leave? Christmas and journeying just seem to go together.

The Bible, of course, is one journey story after another. Abraham and Sarah leave Ur to follow the path an unknown God set for them from Mesopotamia to Syria to Canaan to Egypt and back to Canaan. Their grandson Jacob flees the wrath of his brother to go back to Syria to find a wife. In his old age, Jacob and his family travel to Egypt to survive a famine. The Hebrews stay there many generations until Moses leads them on the Exodus—the great journey back to the promised land. Later, of course, the people are carried into exile in Babylon, and later return home to rebuild their homeland.

So it's not surprising that Luke tells us of a journey for Mary and Joseph. First of all, Luke sets the scene—the historical and political context for the journey. Caesar Augustus—Caesar the Great—was emperor of the

Roman Empire. He declared a great census, so that people's names would be on the tax rolls. This was the first enrollment, Luke noted—we don't know of any others—when Quirinius was governor of Syria, the Roman province which included Israel. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, in Galilee, to the North. Joseph's family—descendants of King David—lived in Bethlehem, southwest of Jerusalem. Remember Bethlehem—the House of Bread—from the story of Ruth, who would be David's grandmother? It wasn't an easy journey, going from Nazareth to Bethlehem. They had to make their way around or through Samaria, an unfriendly area for traveling Jews. There were roads, but they wound through, up, over, and down, hills. It would be like a dryer version of making a walking journey through the Shawnee National Forest, or the Missouri Ozarks. It was 110 miles as the crow flies, but the winding paths probably nearly doubled the mileage. And Mary, of course, was nearing her delivery date. Traditional portrayals show an older Joseph leading the way and Mary riding a donkey. However it actually took place, it wouldn't have been an easy trip. Finally, though, they would come to Bethlehem, crowded with other visitors, with long lines at the tax enrollment tables, waiting to put their names on the dotted lines. And they would look for lodging, and they would have trouble. Was Joseph anxious and Mary serene? We can only guess. But finally the journey was over. Or was it?

Next Sunday and on Christmas Eve we will get to the birth of the Christ child. But let's go back to the journey for a bit. On one level, Mary and Joseph seem like helpless pawns, tossed about by the impersonal forces of history, like refugees fleeing from conflict in Syria today. After all, it was a command of Caesar that had set them on their way. And it was Quirinius the governor whose bureaucrats organized the enrollment and enforced compliance. But have no doubt. For Luke, it isn't the emperor or the governor who is really in charge here. No, it was Israel's God—the one who had sent the archangel to recruit Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, to be part of a plan to bring redemption, hope and love into a dark and troubled world—Israel's God was the unseen force behind history. Everyone assumed that by going from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph were carrying out the commands of Caesar Augustus. But it was really God's plan, so that the holy birth would take place in just the right place. The Messiah, David's descendant, should be born in David's city. "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,

who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days." (Micah 5:2 NRSV)

God led Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem, just as sure as God led Moses to lead the Hebrews on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. But Bethlehem wasn't their final destination. To tell the rest of the story we have to switch to Matthew's Gospel. Some time after Jesus' birth, Matthew reports—and you'll see this story acted out Wednesday evening—the magi came and visited the family at a home in Bethlehem. But the magi, the wise men, had inadvertently tipped off Herod as to the birth of a possible competitor for power. Herod had asked them to come back to Jerusalem so that he too could come and worship, but the magi became suspicious and returned home by another route. And again, a dream came to Joseph, and the family fled to Egypt, away from Herod's power and Herod's wrath. Jesus, like Moses, would be a refugee child in Egypt, waiting to return after Herod's death. Matthew would say that this too was a fulfillment of scripture—"out of Egypt I have called my son."

Jesus would take many journeys in his life, and those journeys would ultimately lead to the cross and then the empty tomb. From there, his followers would go to what were then the ends of the earth, carrying the good news that through Jesus Christ, God had brought salvation to the earth.

At the beginning of this sermon, I shared some memories of nice Christmas journeys from my childhood and youth. Think for a moment of all the literal and physical journeys you have taken in your lives—seeing the world in the military, going off to college, going on honeymoons, hitting the road for vacation trips, moving to new homes. Kurt and Margaret were telling me last week of their honeymoon journey 10 years ago, going from here in Illinois down to Florida, across the Gulf Coast, and finally to California and back, seeing myriads of relatives along the way. That's one neat example of the journeys we all take.

Congregations have life journeys, too. They may not travel as far geographically as its members do, but they evolve through time. Just a little over a week ago, I told one of the staff members at Eden Seminary the story of how First Christian Church in Caseyville and Hillcrest Christian Church in Belleville became one—how you decided which building to use; how you decided which pastor would lead you. She was fascinated. "I've got to meet these people," she said. Why? Because you came together in a creative way. Because you took leaps of faith. Now the search committee is getting ready to start looking at candidates for settled pastor—another leap of faith. All your active support of reaching out to feed others—another leap of faith. You're not a dying church; you're a church finding new ways to live; new ways to serve; new ways to love on your faith journey.

Now, think of your personal faith journeys. How far have you come since childhood? How has your faith grown since you became a Christian?

Where has God led you? Who have been your spiritual companions on the journey? Where do you think that God is leading you next? Wherever you are on your faith journey through life; or your life journey into faith; one thing you can be sure of—the God of Mary and Joseph and Jesus is your constant companion and your ultimate destination. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

Call to prayer: We can pray anytime. God always listens, God always cares. Yet, there's something special about being here together, lifting our prayers together as a beloved community. The beauty of this sanctuary decorated for Advent, the symbols of God's presence, and the faces of our brothers and sisters in Christ draw us closer to one another, and closer to God.

(hymn, concerns, silence)

Prayer: (vndb p. 1) God of hope,
you call us from the exile of our sin
with the good news of restoration;
you build a highway through the wilderness;
you come to us and bring us home.
Comfort us with the expectation of your saving power,
made known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In this Advent season, we remember the travels of Mary and Joseph as they prepared for the birth of Christ. And we remember the journey of Advent itself, as step by step, we draw closer to Christmas. May this Advent journey deepen our faith and expand our love. In our love, O Lord, we remember Margaret Sutton, recuperating from a fall...

May your spirit guide us as we seek new ways to serve you, in our personal lives, and also in the life of this church.

May your love inspire us to be loving and caring, not just to those closest to us, but to the poor and needy; to the hurting and hungry; to the ill and injured. For when we do so, and when we act upon that love, we know that we are doing your will, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Communion: (jwr) So often in this Christmas season, we face a table loaded with abundant food. Perhaps that makes it even more of a gift to come, week by week, to this table, where we rejoice not in the amount of food, but in the impact of these elements. Simple gifts, common gifts; bread which reminds us of the very basic stuff, the "staff of life, and a tiny cup, simply enough to taste this fruit of the vine.

In these gifts, let us receive the full power of God's grace and love; the greatest gift of all. Amen.