

ON A LONG & DIFFICULT JOURNEY

Luke 2:1-20

December 19, 2021

The Prophet Isaiah begins the Christmas story in this way – *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned”* (Isaiah 9:2). These words were words of hope for the people living under the tyranny of Rome at that very first Christmas, and now 2000 years later we still need to hear these same words again, as many are walking in darkness, especially with these ongoing COVID issues. Here in Canada, we are not living under oppression by a foreign nation like Rome, but we are living under the oppression of darkness in a godless secular nation in which Christ is continuously being removed from many segments of our society, with the church being pushed further-and-further to the outer fringe of society with no voice. So, as we are again re-read the drama of the Christmas story, we can feel the same anticipation of those that lived in first century Israel, hoping that their prayers would finally be answered; hoping the long expected Messiah would finally come to rescue Israel from the clutches of this evil empire. The hope of Israel was for the Messiah to be born and our hope today is for God to move in a mighty way among us and bring revival to our lives, to this church, and to this land!

As we celebrate Christmas this year – what are you hoping for? Is it the same old stuff as last year, or is it something new, a new burden, a new challenge, a new family situation, a new work situation? Every one of us here are people of hope, or we wouldn't be worshipping here this morning. And as people of hope, we all suffer with things that we can't explain and don't understand – we are looking for answers – we are all looking for a mighty move of God. I want to tell you that this deep felt longing of hope is a gift from God to us as kingdom people, because it causes us to look beyond ourselves, our government, our medical professionals, and earnestly seek God and the things of God. So, we gather together here to worship on Sundays and at other times of the week, because we have hope for a glorious future, regardless of what we see and what we hear around us, because God continues to shine a light into the darkness and His light is brighter than any darkness we are currently experiencing.

A few Sundays ago, we looked at those divine encounters, those angelic visits to both Mary and Joseph that directed their lives and brought them to the place that God wanted them to be, we concluded that we once again need divine encounters

in our lives, we once again need to hear God's voice speak clearly and prophetically into our lives and into this church, because we all have both physical, emotional and spiritual needs. So, we gather together as the body of Christ not only to worship, but also to hear from God, hoping for and praying for, and anticipating a divine encounter. So, where do you need a divine encounter today? In what way would you like God to show up in your life today and answer that prayer or give you hope in one of your hopeless situations? God calls His people to meet together because they are people of hope, called to encourage one another as we travel this long difficult journey of life to our reward in Heaven!

The Christmas Story as we know it is only found in two of the four Gospels – Matthew and Luke, and we don't know for sure how it actually took place. However, the important point is that God came in the flesh to live among us according to the prophecy found in **Isaiah 9:6-7**, ***“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”*** And that's why Jesus had to be born as a baby to a virgin in the town of Bethlehem – to be *“God with us.”* God had to become one of us, become human in every way, so that Jesus Christ could be our Saviour and the Saviour of the world, for only a sinless man could defeat sin, death and take authority over Satan. This Sunday, I want us to go back to looking at the Christmas story through the eyes of Jesus' step-father – faithful Joseph, as he takes this long difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Both Matthew and Luke record this journey that Joseph and Mary in her ninth month of pregnancy made from Nazareth to Bethlehem. When we look at a map of Israel you will notice that Nazareth, the hometown of Mary is in the northern Galilee region of the Holy Land, while Bethlehem, the hometown of Joseph is in the southern Judea region of the Holy Land about 150 km away, across the mountains that divide the Holy Land. The very small village of Bethlehem is located just south of Jerusalem, a short distance of about 10 km. Mary's cousin Elizabeth also lived in this area, in the hill country between Bethlehem and Jerusalem since her husband Zechariah was a priest who served at the Temple. Elderly Zechariah and Elizabeth were a childless couple who also needed hope and

God met their needs in a miraculous way as well. Zechariah was the priest that we read about in the first chapter of Luke's account of the Christmas story, who was also visited by an angel while he was burning incense before the Lord and told that he and his wife Elizabeth, in their old age, would have a son who was called John the Baptist who would prepare the way for the Saviour, calling the people to repent and be baptized in the Jordan River, in preparation for the coming of the Lord. The story of Zechariah, Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist and their interaction with the Christmas story was important to Luke the historian, which also helped to pinpoint the time when Jesus was born, and help prepare the way 30 years later for Jesus' ministry. So, thankfully we have both accounts to get the full picture of the exact timing of Jesus' birth – who came in the fulness of time!

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus begins with the historical context of a Roman census taking place that causes Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem – this historical account helps historians and theologians to determine exactly when Jesus was born, because these were real historical people and real places that still exist today. **Luke 2:1-5, “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.”**

At regular intervals the Roman government would conduct a census to get an accurate account of their citizens for taxation purposes, not unlike the census that takes place here in Canada at regular intervals. Once the Romans obtained an accurate census of a town or village, they would then determine how much tax that town would have to pay, and then some of the Jewish residents of the town would be hired as tax collectors (Jesus disciple Matthew was once a tax collector hired by the Romans Government). These tax collectors would be required to collect what was required by the Romans, plus add a percentage to that amount as their share, as their salary, and that's why the tax collectors in Jesus' day were so despised and hated, because they could legally add on and collect whatever percentage they wanted, and as a result most were wealthy as they took advantage of their own people (Jesus had an encounter with a tax collector named Zacchaeus).

What a dilemma and hardship was it for Joseph with a nine month pregnant wife to travel that long journey to Bethlehem, but he had to go, because the penalties for not appearing for the census were serious – confiscation of property, scourging, imprisonment, and that’s why there was this urgency for Joseph to return to his hometown of Bethlehem as quickly as possible. It was not possible to wait until the baby was born or until the child was weaned. Typically, only the man needed to appear before the census-taker, so it’s not known why Joseph decided to take his very pregnant wife Mary along on this long difficult journey, if it wasn’t required by law. However, we now know that it was the work of the Holy Spirit, nudging Joseph to take Mary along, so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem as prophesied by **Micah 5:2, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”** To fulfill prophecy this was also the text that would be used to identify the place where the Magi from the East would find “*the one who was born king of the Jews,*” whose star they had been seen rise in the East indicating a King has been born, a Jewish King who will rule and eternal kingdom. All Joseph knew was that something inside of him was telling him he needed to take Mary along with him as he returned to his hometown to be registered, and thankfully, faithful Joseph once again obeyed the nudge of the Holy Spirit.

God had put His plan into place – but both Mary and Joseph must have been upset by the terrible timing of this census and the need to travel on at least a ten day journey to a town they may have never been before, away from family and friends when they needed them the most. They must have prayed earnestly pleading to God, “*Why is this happening to us?*” But this was all according to God’s plan to fulfill scripture, to make sure they were in the right place at the right time. It’s interesting how God works in our lives as well, we also feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit at times, guiding and directing our path, as Joseph had felt that nudge. And like Joseph, we need to also pay attention, listen, and act accordingly in order to find ourselves in the right place, right in the middle of God’s will and in His perfect timing. Not too early or too late!

God orchestrates our lives to fulfill His purposes through the gift of the Holy Spirit, but we have to choose to be sensitive to his voice and listen and then act to be in the center of His will. This is what’s called God’s providence – God directing our lives to fulfill His purposes, but like Joseph, we have a part to play, to pay attention and then obey regardless how difficult that may be! I find that God

speaks to us all the time, but He speaks to us the loudest and clearest when we are going through those difficult seasons of our lives, when we are also on that long difficult journey, because those are the times when we tend to be more tuned in, spending more time in prayer and reading His word. I don't believe that our good and loving Heavenly Father brings into our lives health issues, loneliness, heartache, loss, pain and suffering, but He will definitely use those times to speak into our lives, as we are more open to the nudge of the Holy Spirit. For example, when Joseph agonized over hearing the news that his fiancée Mary was pregnant, he was very open to hearing God's voice to take Mary as his wife!

So, let's go back to our map for the journey to Bethlehem – Joseph and very pregnant Mary set out from Nazareth, and there were two routes they could have taken. The most common route taken by Jews travelling from the northern Galilee area to the southern Judea area was the longer route along the Jordan River Valley, which bypassed Samaria. This was the preferred route because relations between the Jews and the Samaritans were strained, they hated each other, so they stayed out of each other's territory, similar to the relationship today between the Jews and Palestinians. However, the downside of this route was that near the end of the journey it involved a long 24 km relentless and steady climb from Jericho to Jerusalem, travelling up an elevation of 3400 ft. through mountainous terrain with bandits lurking to rob travellers. The alternate route was a shorter route, following an ancient roadway known as the Way of the Patriarchs, a Trade Route which cut right through the center of Samaria, which also involved travelling the rugged hills and mountains in central Israel. We don't know which route they travelled, but it is believed that Mary and Joseph would have taken this less travelled shorter route, even though it also involved some hilly terrain, but not that steep climb to Jerusalem at the end of the journey.

We often picture Mary riding a donkey during this difficult 150 km trip, but Scripture doesn't mention a donkey; however, you would think that Joseph would have acquired or borrowed a donkey for pregnant Mary to ride if one was available to make the journey easier. Laurie and I have walked the hills and mountains of Israel – and even today with leveled paths, it's still difficult for those with mobility issues, so I can't image what it would have been like for Mary in her ninth month of pregnancy. I have no experience being pregnant carrying around all that extra weight in front of you, but I remember how exhausted Laurie felt back when she was near the end of her pregnancy, with the backaches, pains, mobility issues and difficulty in sleeping. Even if Mary was riding a donkey, it was still not a smooth

enjoyable ride, and then each evening they had to stop and sleep on the hard ground, most likely waking up stiff and sore.

When you look at all of the artwork and Christmas cards depicting Mary on the journey riding a donkey, she's sitting side-saddle and usually smiling. I don't imagine Mary was smiling much; instead, I imagine Mary being weeping most of the way in her discomfort, and possibly often begging Joseph to slow down, or to stop, or to watch out for those rocks on the path that caused the donkey to stumble. It definitely wouldn't be the pleasant journey depicted on our Christmas cards. This journey surely was uncomfortable, unpleasant, and frightening in many ways, and they most likely wondered every day along the journey where God was through this difficult ordeal.

So, here we are once again asking – why was God making things so difficult with yet another challenge. They already had to suffer through months of shame and now with a journey that was forced upon them because of the Roman census. A journey neither one of them wanted to take, especially Mary, leaving her family and hometown behind when she needed them the most, facing delivery of her very first baby in the presence of strangers. The situation Mary and Joseph were facing here is nothing new, it illustrates what often happens in life to many of us. At times, all of us find ourselves on a long difficult journey we don't want to take, and like Mary and Joseph, it may happen because of someone else's decisions or actions. For example: the difficulty of moving to another city or a great distance away from home, away from family and friends because of school or work; moving into a senior's residence because you now need extra care; downsizing to an apartment because you can no longer upkeep your home; facing difficulty of the divorce of your children or parents that turns your world upside-down, the uncertainty of a life threatening illness – these all create stress and anxiety, and we may find ourselves discouraged and brokenhearted along this journey. We often wrestle and question God, and may even think that God has abandoned us at those times, but God promises to sustain us and be with us through the darkest valleys. **Psalm 23:4, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and staff comfort me.”**

Throughout the Bible we see many journeys that people didn't want to take – and in fact most of the Bible contains stories of God using these difficult journeys to bring about something good. For example: there's Noah and his family stuck on an ark for a year with a bunch of smelly animals; there's Abraham and Sarah being

uprooted from their home in their retirement years, told to travel to a place far from home which became the Promised Land (Israel); there's a boy named Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers, ending up in Egypt; there's Daniel and his three friends sent off to Babylon as refugees, where three of them are thrown into a blazing furnace, and Daniel is thrown into a lion's den; and our greatest example is of Jesus' journey to the cross. A good God doesn't cause these things to happen, but they are part of life, the result of living in a sinful world, but God can and does often bring about good and blessings in these bad situations. God has a way of bringing good and beautiful things from the pain, heartache, and the disappointments we often face in life when we put our hope and trust into His hands.

I don't know why it had to be so difficult for Mary and Joseph in the Christmas story, beginning with a scandal and then ending with this long difficult journey to a stable in Bethlehem – but the result was Emmanuel – God with us! Whenever we find ourselves on an unplanned difficult journey, we need to recall these encouraging words from the prophet Isaiah, ***“The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint”*** (Isaiah 40:28-31).

After this long and difficult journey, Mary and Joseph end up in Bethlehem – and the familiar Christmas story tells us that they had nowhere to stay, there was no room in the inn. And, I don't believe that a cruel innkeeper refused to care for them and sent them on their way; instead, I believe a compassionate innkeeper allowed them to bed down with the animals in the stable behind the inn, and here Mary gives birth. Luke is the only Gospel that records this part of the story that we find so familiar, but there are a few problems with this familiar story: 1) Bethlehem was a very small village at this time, of only a few hundred people, so it's unlikely that it had an inn with quest rooms available. The much larger city of Jerusalem was within walking distance, only 10 km away, so those travelling for the census would have stayed in Jerusalem where there would have been adequate accommodations for large groups of travellers, since they would come to Jerusalem and the Temple on a regular basis to the annual Jewish festivals; 2) If Bethlehem was Joseph's hometown, so why wouldn't they have stayed with

relatives; 3) the Bethlehem area is filled with numerous caves, so they would have kept their animals in a cave not a stable.

Here's what I believe really happened – because Bethlehem was Joseph's hometown this census would have brought most of Joseph's family back to Bethlehem and we don't know how many siblings and cousins Joseph had, but most likely at this time the family relative's home would have been a busy hectic place. So, when Mary went into labour, it makes sense that the family would have cleared out the cave where the animals were kept, so there would have been a private peaceful place to deliver her baby, and most likely with a mid-wife present, which was very common in those days. Placing Mary in the family's stable would have been an act of compassion by Joseph's family, so they could have the privacy they needed for the birth.

When visiting Israel today – most tours will take you to the supposed birthplace of Jesus which is a cave below the Church of the Nativity (SLIDE). The church located here is the oldest continuously used church building in the world, consisting of three still active churches: a Greek Orthodox Church, an Arminian Church, and a Roman Catholic Church. While on tour you can also travel a short distance, a few kilometres away, to visit the Shepherd's Fields (the fields of Boaz that we read about in the book of Ruth) where there are many natural caves that would have been used by shepherds to house their sheep. Regardless of how this all took place, what the Gospel writers intended for us to notice here was the humble surroundings of Jesus' birth. The Saviour of the world, the King of kings, the Son of God, was born in a cave where animals were kept. Jesus' crib was a feeding trough for animals, and those first visitors that came to visit the baby were non-religious uneducated shepherd outcasts, those on the lowest rung of the social ladder. The night that Jesus was born, God sent angels to invite shepherds to meet the newborn king, and not just any shepherds, but the night-shift shepherds, the lowest of the low of the shepherds. Those that were forced by the other higher-ranking day shepherds to guard the sheep at night while they slept.

This is the Christmas story that we celebrate every year – beginning with a scandal and ending with a long difficult journey to a little insignificant town called Bethlehem, where God's Son is born in humility, surrounded by His humble parents Mary and Joseph, and most likely surrounded by animals, and visited by the lowest-of-the-low, the night-shift shepherds. This clearly demonstrates what Peter puts in his letter to us in **1 Peter 5:5**, ***“God opposes the proud, but shows***

favour to the humble.” Jesus identifies with the humble, not the proud. Jesus comes to and identifies with the lowest-of-the-low and elevates them to great heights of glory. And as Jesus Himself said in the parable of the workers in the vineyard who were all paid the same wage whether they worked a full day or only an hour – **Matthew 20:16**, ***“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*** That is the way God’s Kingdom works. When life takes us down – God elevates us to heights of glory!

On the fourth Sunday of Advent we light the candle of peace, reminding us why Jesus the Prince of Peace came as a baby in a manger 2000 years ago – **Isaiah 9:6-7**, ***“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.”*** Jesus came to give us the gift of endless peace right in the midst of our challenges, turmoil, and uncertainty as we travel along that long and difficult road that we may be travelling down during this Christmas season. And then, as we continue to travel down this long and difficult COVID road, with this new variant, we especially need this gift of peace that passes all understanding, remembering Jesus’ words to His disciples, hours before Christ went to the cross:

John 14:27, ***“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”***

John 16:33, ***“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble, But take heart! I have overcome the world.”***