

The Journey of Joseph
Luke 2:1-7
December 24, 2017

Over the past three weeks, we have been discussing Joseph, the earthly or adopted father of Jesus. We've discussed how Joseph was of humble origin – a simple carpenter. We've discussed how Joseph must have been a kind, gentle, loving individual; and we've discussed how Joseph must have been a true mentor, raising, teaching, and caring for the Son of God. Today, our series takes a little different twist. It's Christmas Eve, so today we hear those familiar passages of scripture: how there was a census to be taken, how Joseph needed to go to his home town to register for the census, how he and Mary would make the seventy-mile trip from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, and how there Mary would deliver her child.

Now don't be confused by that word "census." In fact our NRSV translation used the words "to be registered." Today, in the United States we take a census every ten years; and it's used for lots of different things. As an amateur genealogist, I'm thankful for the census. It's a huge help as I try to trace long deceased ancestors. But in Roman times the census, the registration had one primary purpose – taxation. The Romans would take a census; and, based on the population of any particular city, that city would be taxed. Furthermore, individuals would vie for the right to go about to the citizens to collect those taxes on behalf of the city. The tax collector would collect the prescribed amount for the city and an extra amount for their salary, and it was pretty much up to them how much extra they collected. Furthermore, they acted with the full authority and power of the Roman government. Is it any wonder that tax collectors were hated and seen as sinners?

Now, in keeping with Roman law, if one failed to register, particularly if that one was a commoner, the penalties were quite severe including imprisonment and maybe even slavery. So Joseph had no choice. He was required to go to Bethlehem. But why? Why did he drag Mary with him? She was a woman. She was not required to register. Besides, her hometown was Nazareth. Surely, he could have left his very pregnant wife in the care of relatives. We really don't know for sure. There was a good chance that Joseph was fearing violence and wanted Mary by his side so he could protect her and look after her. Indeed violence often erupted during the registration. A Roman historian tells of an armed rebellion in the town of Sepphoris, just a few miles from Nazareth. The Roman army crushed that revolt killing many and taking others away as slaves. Perhaps Joseph, the loving husband, felt the need to protect Mary. Or perhaps, and maybe also, the Spirit was nudging Joseph to take Mary with him to Bethlehem. We

spoke last week about the call of the Spirit. Maybe Joseph had this sense of call – he could not leave Mary at home at this time.

Now think about the trip... I stated last week that I've never been a father, and I've certainly never been pregnant; but women who have been pregnant tell me how physically miserable the ninth month of pregnancy can be. Imagine the poor young pregnant teenager being loaded on a donkey to travel all day, every day for nine days to get to Bethlehem. (By the way, the Bible never says anything about a donkey; but, it's probably a pretty safe assumption that Joseph procured a donkey for Mary to ride.)

Now, there's another interesting aside. How does one get from Nazareth to Bethlehem. There are two ways to get there. You can travel East to the Sea of Galilee, down the Jordan River Valley to Jericho, and up the steep, rocky, and sometimes dangerous road to Bethlehem. This was actually an easier route; but it's also much longer. Many Jews would take this route, not because it was easier; but because it avoided Samaria. The other route is what's known as the Way of the Patriarchs. It's much shorter, but it's more rugged terrain, and it goes straight through Samaria; and, as the Gospels testify, the Jews hated the Samaritans. There was significant conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans. But, Adam Hamilton, the writer of the book on which I'm basing a significant part of this series wonders if Joseph might not have gone straight through Samaria. In fact, is it possible that Jesus' kindness for the Samaritans was, in fact, learned from his earthly father who would have told the story of the journey through Samaria to Bethlehem leading up to Jesus' birth. Maybe this father even told of kindness, hospitality, and generosity on the part of the Samaritans toward this Jewish father and his pregnant wife.

But back to the journey. . . There is little doubt that this is a journey that Joseph and Mary did not want to make. They simply had no choice. They could not defy Rome. But perhaps God had a hand in this journey. I stated that Joseph may have sensed the nudge of the Holy Spirit to take Mary to Bethlehem. Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem to fulfill what was written in by the Prophet Micah: "But you, O Bethlehem... from you shall come forth one who is to rule Israel." (Micah 5:2) Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem for the Wise Men to find him, and I'll say more about that in a couple weeks. Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem to the glory of God for the salvation of the world.

The Bible is full of stories of journeys that people did not want to take. Did Noah want to build an ark? Did Joseph and Sarah want to leave home in search of "a promised land"? Did the Joseph of Genesis want to be sold into slavery and carried off to Egypt? Did Ruth and Naomi, after just losing their husbands want to travel to Bethlehem? Did Daniel want to be thrown into the lion's den? No, I don't believe the God created the awful situations that these people found

themselves in. I don't believe that God intentionally causes pain and suffering. But I do believe in the very soul of my being that God walks with us through those dark valleys of our lives. I don't believe God caused the census to happen, or that God willed the huge discomfort that Mary must have felt on that journey. But God turned that journey into good; and God has an amazing way of turning the bad things into good. And that's what we learn from today's example of Joseph and his bride Mary.

Each of us is on a journey, a journey through life. Each of our journeys will have good times and bad times, ups and downs. But God walks with us through the good times and the bad times. God will never leave us, and I'll be saying more about that tonight; but what about your journeys? I hope there are some good times. A marriage, the birth of a child, a significant trip. I've stated before that my wedding day was the happiest and most special day of my life. And the second happiest, most special, most significant day of my life was the day of my ordination. But there have also been dark times. I will never forget coming home from school on May 17, 1973 to be told my 53 year old father has suddenly died that afternoon.

Yes, we all also experience sad times. Severe illness, the loss of a loved one, divorce, unemployment. Right now, some of you are going through really happy times and some of you are struggling with difficult journeys; and some of you are experiencing happy and sad times all at the same time. But regardless of where you are at, God is with you; and God whom we today might call the risen Christ will never leave you alone. Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always."

Still, I cannot end this message without also recognizing the role of the church. It was Paul who first referred to the church as the body of Christ; and I tell you that part of the role of the church is to walk those journeys with you. To care for you, to support you, to nourish you, to celebrate the good times with you and to support and love you through the hard times. The church does not replace Jesus, but the church can make the love of Jesus real in amazing ways.

I really like to view life through the metaphor of the journey. I love the fact that our long range plan is called "Our Faithful Journey." It is the journey of the church, and we are the church together. And so, I say to you, this Christmas, think about the journey of Mary and Joseph and the journey they made, a journey with an amazing conclusion. And think about your journeys, the good ones and the bad. Know that God walks every step of every journey with us. We are never alone. That's the good news of God's amazing love, a love that was made real with the birth of a baby at the end of a journey 2000 year ago. A love that will never die. Praise be to God.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,

Like Joseph and Mary, we are all on journeys.

We thank you and we praise you
that you walk our journeys with us.

We thank you and we praise you for the baby,
born at the end of Joseph and Mary's journey.

May his love, joy and peace dwell within us
as we journey together with him
through all the events of our lives.

Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
North Olmsted United Methodist Church