

Luke 2:1-7
Journey to Jerusalem
Joseph Series Week 4
December 24th, 2017 10am

Mary and Joseph took if not an unexpected trip to Jerusalem then one that could be described as difficult. You see the journey from Nazareth where they were living to Bethlehem was a 90 mile walk whichever route you took. You see in Jesus' day there were two routes most people would take from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

One route went right through Samaria. It was called the Patriarchs highway. It went through the mountains of the Holy Land down to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The problem was it passed through Samaria. Most practicing Jews would avoid going through Samaria, because they held the Samaritans to be racially inferior and religiously heretics. The level of religious and racial prejudice between these peoples is what made Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan so shocking in his day.

Here is a picture of that route:



Note the dark black line runs through Samaria and through the mountains. The dashed line to the right of the Jordan River was the preferred route of the Jews going to Jerusalem from Nazareth. That way they literally did not have to set foot in Samaria. Here is another picture of the Holy Land that shows that route, the preferred route, a little better.



But whatever route you took you were looking at 8 to 10 days walking or riding on a donkey.

How many of you have ever ridden a horse or a donkey? How comfortable was that? Any ride a horse or donkey while 9 months pregnant?

I remember taking my wife Deede to Saguaro Lake on a twisty winding road when she was very pregnant. She was not amused. I was lucky to have survived.

Anyway, have you ever thought why Joseph took his 9 month pregnant wife on a 90 mile donkey ride? Was he crazy or cruel? No, remember he was made in the image of the Father. He was loving, kind and protective.

Just before Jesus was born there was an armed rebellion in a town near Nazareth. It was a town called Sepphoris. You can see it on the map just north of Nazareth.



The Romans put down that rebellion but just about wiped Sepphoris off the map. There was still a lot of violence in the area so many feel Joseph took Mary with him for her and the baby's protection. Mary did not have to go with Joseph for Joseph to register for the census, but she went. And God had a plan. A plan set in motion long ago.

Now Nazareth was Mary's hometown that was where she was living when the angel Gabriel told her she was going to bear Jesus. Joseph's home town is believed to be Bethlehem for it was to there he was returning to be registered for the census which would determine future taxes.

Now one of the curious things about this story is that there was no place for Mary and Joseph to stay. As it says, “There was no room at the inn”. Or “No guest room.” As the NIV version says. In Joseph’s own home town no one would put them up, and they had to stay in a stable where Mary gave birth?

Well the town was full because of the census, because of everyone coming back to register for the census. Inns in those days were just spare rooms where everyone slept on the floor. Not much privacy to give birth, and if a woman gave birth in a room that room was ritually unclean for a number of days. Maybe it was an act of kindness in that the innkeeper let them stay in the stable. It would have been quiet, private, away from prying eyes to take care of the indignities of child birth.

You see in that area of Israel up to this day stables are often caves. We have a western view of stables as barns made of wood, but wood was scarce, caves weren’t, and were often used as stables.

When I was in Israel four years ago I was impressed that much of the land was limestone. Limestone has many caves. Caves make great stables.

You can see this in the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is built over the cave that they believe Jesus was born in. They really remodeled the cave with marble etc. so it is hard to imagine what it originally looked like.

But here is a picture of that place as it looks today.



Now near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is a cave that actually was used as a stable. We visited it. To this day in Israel they are using caves as stables. Here is a picture of one. Notice the house on top and the stable cave beneath.



And the manger, often it was a trough cut into the stone. Here is a stone feeding trough, an ancient manger found in Israel.



In the Grotto of the church of the Nativity you can see a similar trough cut into the side of the cave. This blows a lot of our images of the manger as we see it in most nativities. It is not made out of wood. It was stone and carved into the side of the cave.

Not exactly the place to give birth that Mary would have imagined, but it sufficed, and it was in Bethlehem.

We've all taken unexpected, unwanted journeys in life where we just want to give up, but just keep walking on. God seems to bring good out of the disasters we find ourselves in in life. And God walks with us in the difficult journeys of life and is there to greet us in the end.

Mary, I believe, did not want to go to Bethlehem at 9 months pregnant but her long difficult walk provided that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of the Scriptures. Matthew 2:6 quotes Micah 2, **“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;**

for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

Jesus, later, again in fulfillment of prophecy goes to and returns from their journey to Egypt, **“So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.**

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Mt. 2:14-15

When I was at FUMC of Mesa I had a dream to build a Family Life Center for the children and youth of that church. It took 14 years for this dream to become a reality. It was a journey of about 12 years and a million dollars to buy the property for the building with many road blocks along the way that caused me to want to give up. It took another 2 years to build it and 2.5 million dollars. I had planned to live out my career at that church as a youth and children’s education pastor and then our lives took an unexpected journey.

Several years before that building was completed God let me know in a dream that once it was completed we would be moving. Shortly after the dedication of the building I got a call from the DS, which went like this, “We are moving you to Christ Church in Tucson and we want your answer by noon tomorrow.” What could I say? We moved and it was very, very hard; especially on my wife who left her very best friends, but the journey got better for here in Tucson we have two of our children and our grandchildren, our other daughter is within driving distance and I take care of my parents constantly.

Health issues are often unexpected journeys. I had a mechanical earplug fail while hunting and thought my hearing loss was because of that. But when I went to the hearing specialist he said something I will always remember, “We don’t see these things very often.” And then I knew I was in trouble for he continued, “Can I show this to my partner?”

I had two very rare benign tumors in my ears that if left untreated would have led to very serious problems even death. Thank God that mechanical ear plug failed. We indeed take unexpected even painful journeys (believe you me when I say it hurts to have your ear cut off and glued back on) but God walks with us often turning the evil that touches us into great good.

Many have heard of Joni Eareckson Tada. She grew up a normal happy active outdoorsy type of girl. At the age of 18 she was paralyzed from the neck down in a diving accident. She went through deep

depression, suicidal thoughts, and doubted her faith to finally come back as a motivational speaker writer and painter. She paints with a brush between her teeth. She has written over 40 books her most popular one being *Joni: The unforgettable story of a young woman's struggle against quadriplegia & depression*". She is married and her "Joni and Friends Radio" spot is heard daily on over 1000 radio stations.

Her journey of pain and paralysis is not one she chose, or anyone would choose, but God walked with her through the journey and when her life ends here on earth will meet her on the other side.



Life takes us on rough unexpected journeys to place we do not want to go, but if we recognize that God goes with us to those places and will walk us out, and redeem the experience; we can face and overcome the pain that life often brings.

We can embrace the unexpected and difficult journeys in life knowing God walks with us and will be there to greet us at the end.



So how do we survive in the meantime when the walk, the journey of life is so very hard? Remember this, after the Holy Family's journey to Jerusalem and the birth in the stable came the angels and their message of great joy. God will give us victory in the end.

Remember here at Vista you don't walk alone. All of us received walking sticks when we joined as a symbol that we walk the journey of faith together.

And when life gets hard, health and family and friends go, remember the times God touched your life with good. Remember when life and church, home and family, children and faith were good.

Treasure these things as Mary did and they will help you when the times are hard, the journey long and steep and dangerous.

Tonight at 8pm we will have breaking good news... "how Mary survived and thrived in her difficult journey of life as she treasured these things."

In Jesus' name, amen.