

God Journeys With Us (Sermon, 12-29-19)

Many of us of a certain age remember a song we learned around the holidays that begins, “Over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go; the horse knows the way to carry the sleigh, through the deep and drifting snow.” It was, in fact, one of my mother’s favorites. Oddly enough, it was not written to commemorate Christmas in December, but Thanksgiving in November; and secondly, the poet, Lydia Marie Child, wrote it in 1844 as she remembered childhood visits to her grandparents’ home—just a few miles down the road in Medford, Massachusetts.

So even a hundred and seventy years ago, when travel was a lot harder, during the holidays families wanted to be together: After we’ve been through a rough year, returning home can provide a comforting sense of security and acceptance.

Almost as long ago, I can myself remember a Christmas visit to my father’s family in Mississippi when I was six years old; we all piled into our ancient 1949 DeSoto and headed from the Shenandoah Valley to the Magnolia State, but along the way we had an international interruption in the form of the Hong Kong flu. Everyone in the family came down with influenza but me; I did, however, have a bad case of cabin fever, and ran all over the tiny motel room, until I fell and put a deep cut in my forehead. There was a further delay to stitch me up at the hospital ER, but eventually we made it to our destination, where I proudly related to my cousins the number of doctors and nurses it had taken to hold me down.

But because our father hated to be away from the farm for long, after a few days we found ourselves back on the road. At this point, the DeSoto decided that it had had enough, and broke down completely; my parents were probably close to doing the same, but somehow they found another used car they could afford which got us home. It was an enormous 1957 Chevy station wagon, roomy and reliable, but it never took us on another Christmas visit to either my father’s family in Mississippi, or to my mother’s in New England. I think quite understandably, my parents had decided that the safest thing was to simply stay put during the Holidays.

Which is the reason many people simply don’t like to travel at all. Even today, one often simply feels safer at home—and this must have been especially true at the time of Christ’s birth. The legend of the Christmas story, in fact, has probably distracted us from its actual reality. But as we look at today’s text, we see that the Nativity narrative is fraught with danger.

Even the period in which the narrative is placed would puzzle parents who want the best for their child; then, daily life, even for the well-to-do, was daunting; very little had changed in the last thousand years or so, and very little would change for the next thousand: Getting food and firing for your family was the goal of your life; you and they could die at a young age from lack of even the most basic health care; and if you had a nervous breakdown from trying to survive in the midst of all this, you were deemed demonically possessed.

Yet this is the time in which God physically placed his Son, in a poor but respectable Jewish family, struggling along under an oppressive Roman regime; and now this regime had demanded that everyone return to his hometown to be part of a taxing census. Dismaying news indeed, even for those in good physical shape.

Mary, however, was far along in her pregnancy in a day when bearing and birthing a child was one of

the most dangerous things a woman could do. Now she was facing a trip of at least 110 miles, and quite possibly on foot; for, although Christmas cards will still show her as a blonde wrapped in blue chiffon riding side saddle on a donkey with no saddle, we have no indication that she in fact had such a conveyance. Who could blame her if the thought crossed her mind that, if this is how God takes care of his son, not to mention the boy's mother, he's not making a very good job of it?

Yet, possibly, Mary and Joseph did not travel by themselves; this was a massive census that involved the entire region, so others also would be traveling to Bethlehem, and would have sheltered in private homes along the way, as was the custom, for there were few inns in any but the largest towns. Which our text today accurately indicates when it says that there was no guest room available to them.

For even though Bethlehem was, so to speak, Joseph's home town, this was probably one of the few times in its history when it was so crammed; so would be the homes of relatives and friends—not only with people, but possibly with livestock as well. Animal thievery was so frequent that it is mentioned regularly in Scripture; and it was not uncommon to find a manger in the corner of the house. Yet many of these details are educated guesses at best. All we know with any certainty is that there must have been a feeling of intense relief as the holy family finally approached the tiny town of Bethlehem, whose name means “the city of bread”, and that Mary finally laid Jesus in a feeding trough, foreshadowing his later declaration to his disciples, “I am the bread of life.”

Of course, Bethlehem had been prophesied as the birthplace of the Messiah; but why does God put Mary and Joseph through such a dangerous journey to get there? If you or I had been in charge of the timing, I suspect we would have simply had Joseph stay in his hometown as a carpenter, meet Mary there, form a family, and then discover through friends or relatives that there was a good opening for a carpenter in Nazareth. Thus both the specific prophecy that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem would be fulfilled, as well as the unspecified one that he would be called a Nazarene. Prophecies completed, minimum of discomfort to the family: Project done.

In fact, however, the frame and the foundation of the Nativity narrative is not the destination, but the journey itself: Mary travels to Elizabeth; the Holy Family travels to Bethlehem; and now the Wise Men from the East undertake a journey guided at night by a divine source of light, echoing God's guidance of the Israelites out of Egypt; and when the Magi leave, Mary and Joseph, ironically, must flee back into that dark land.

Yet embarking and continuing on this journey at worst time imaginable helped Mary and Joseph to understand that they could fully trust God, with themselves, with their loved ones, and even with the history of their nation and of the world. Because as Mary and Joseph started on their journey, they had, to encourage them, an entire history of God leading his people through peril, from Noah and the Ark, Jonah and the whale, the great Exodus from Egypt, and many others. This was a deepening and developing trust that they would need to call on again and again—often just when they felt they were finally in a secure and safe setting.

Who the Magi were is shrouded in the mists of antiquity: They may have come from Syria or Turkey, and traveled anywhere from 400-700 miles; but they were definitely gentiles, advised kings with wisdom and discretion. To Mary and Joseph, they must have seemed mysterious and intimidating. Yet here they were; and as the magi worshipped the Christ child they presented his parents with nearly priceless gifts—gifts soon to be desperately needed, as the Holy Family fled from Herod into Egypt.

And here we should note that both the Holy Family and the Magi were sent away from what might be called the sanctuary of Bethlehem, back out into the world—the Holy family into the very land its ancestors had escaped centuries ago, and the Magi back to Syria and Turkey, where word of the miraculous birth must have spread.

Yet as Joseph and Mary by this time were surely learning, the truest sanctuary—of both protection and maturing holiness—is not in a specific place, but with a specific being, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as we are led by His direction, His strength, and for His purpose. As we step into a new year, we don't know the direction He will send us; but we know from whom we receive our strength; and we know the purpose of our journey: to share the compassion of Christ and reflect the glory of God.

And as we face our own journey in the coming year, let us remember not only what God has taught us on journeys past, but look forward to how He will make us more like himself as we journey into the future, with both great joy; and sometimes the deepest suffering; yet even that provides us with empathy anew to help others as they too travel. To each other, we can reach out a hand of comfort; and in so doing follow the example that Christ Himself set at Christmas time: For He was not born into wealth; he was not born during a time of political stability or advanced technology; he was not even born as a citizen, but as a migrant, forced as an infant to flee into a hostile and dangerous world.

Yet a less primitive, more prosperous world today is hardly a less perilous one; science may have advanced, but the heart of humanity, in many ways, has not. As Corrie ten Boom's father once reflected, even if Christ were born a thousand times in Bethlehem, and not in us, we would still be lost; and the world without Christ seems lost indeed: Global disruptions, from rapidly increasing climate change to international chaos, to hurt and pain in our communities, tear us apart; but as evil across the world seems to grow, it is comforting to read what C.S. Lewis wrote, even as Great Britain was being bombed in WW II:

“The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but joy, pleasure, and merriment, He has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.” (The Problem of Pain.)

It was during that same war, that my father journeyed from Mississippi to New England, where he was stationed at Bradley Field Army Air Force base in Hartford Connecticut; there he met and married my mother, and was then sent overseas; my mother then journeyed from New England to Mississippi to visit her new mother- and sister-in-law. In the portrait photograph made for the occasion, you see the three neatly dressed ladies with a Christmas tree and pictures of my father and uncle in the background. My father came home. My Uncle Wesley did not. During this time, a carol by another New England composer became not only a favorite of my mother, but of all who were struggling with the holidays during WW II. Written in Cambridge by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the verses reflect his concern about his son surviving the Civil War. It reads:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,

And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said:
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men!"

And as we each step into our journey of 2020, let us remember: "God is not dead, nor doth he sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail"; and with Joseph, Mary, and the Magi, remind ourselves that even when there is little peace on earth, there can be peace in our hearts—if Christ has been born there, as well as in Bethlehem.

