

*The Journey to Bethlehem sermon series*

*“From Nazareth to Bethlehem”*

[Luke 2:1-7](#)

This Advent, we have been reading stories of Jesus’ birth by using Adam Hamilton’s book *Journey* as a reference. After reflecting on the two stories of the angel’s visit, one to Mary and the other to Joseph, last Sunday, we looked at Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. Soon after the angel visited her with the news of her upcoming pregnancy, Mary went to see her relative who was in the 6th month of her own pregnancy. Elizabeth’s home was in Ein Karem, about 80 miles south of her hometown, Nazareth. And Mary would stay there until Elizabeth delivered her child.

Highly likely, it was during Mary’s three month-stay with Elizabeth that Joseph found out what was really going on with his fiancé. According to the Gospel of Matthew, being a righteous man, Joseph initially had planned to dismiss her quietly. He did not want to subject her to public disgrace and even potential death (because back then a woman accused of adultery could be stoned to death). But, Joseph changed his mind when an angel appeared in his dream and told him how Mary had become pregnant. She had conceived through the Holy Spirit, and the child in her womb was going to be Israel’s long-awaited Messiah. And perhaps to emphasize that it is not Joseph’s biological child, Matthew writes that he took her home, but did not lay with her until she had delivered the baby.

Where was Joseph’s home? Was it in Bethlehem or in Nazareth? Did Joseph and Mary get married before Jesus was born? Based on Jesus’ birth story recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, one might assume that Joseph and Mary got married and were living in Bethlehem because that’s where Jesus was born. But, if you read the story carefully, you realize that Matthew does not give you clear answers to these questions.

In the first century, it was typical for a married couple to live with the husband’s parents until they could afford their own home. And, according to the birth story of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Luke, Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth. Since they lived there, we might assume that Joseph married Mary in Nazareth as soon as she came back home from Elizabeth’s house and continued to live there because it was where he and his parents lived. However, Luke says Joseph and Mary were still not married when they went down to Bethlehem to be registered for a census.

Late into Mary’s pregnancy, the Roman Emperor had ordered a census, requiring all the residents in his empire to register in their hometowns. The purpose of the census was to collect more taxes from people. And so, Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem, the city of King David, because he belonged to the family of David. Because she was engaged to him and carrying his child in her womb, Mary also had to go to be registered as she was now considered part of Joseph’s family.

Scholars believe there would have been two possible routes for their trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem: The road less traveled involved going through Samaria. Many Jews despised the Samaritans because they considered the residents of Samaria unclean. Some Jews believed it was dangerous to travel through the region

of Samaria. So, for reasons of purity and/or safety, many Jews avoided Samaria when they traveled south from the Galilee region, even though it meant adding two more days or 20-30 miles to their itinerary.

However, it is possible that Mary and Joseph took this less favored route through Samaria on their journey to Bethlehem. It was not uncommon for the Jews to take this route during the Passover, when large numbers of people traveled to the Jerusalem temple. And it's likely that there were many people traveling south for the census. So, Joseph and Mary were probably in a caravan going through Samaria because this would have cut down on a couple of days of travel.

Of course, Mary and Joseph's traveling through Samaria on their way to Bethlehem is pure speculation, and there is no way to prove which road they chose. But, I believe it is highly possible that they traveled through Samaria, especially when we consider Jesus' attitude towards the Samaritans.

Unlike many other Jews of his time, Jesus did not seem to have any prejudice towards Samaria and its residents. The Gospel of John says Jesus intentionally went into the region of Samaria and ministered to its residents, starting with a woman he encountered at a well. In one of his parables recorded in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus made a Samaritan man a great example of loving your neighbor as you love yourself.

And where do you think Jesus learned that kind of openness towards Samaritans? Perhaps, he learned it from his own earthly parents, as our children would do. A couple of months ago, I caught my 6-year old grandson, Gabriel looking down at his baby sister with a gaze of great affection and saying these words, "Olivia, you do not know how much I love you." I couldn't believe it because they were the words his dad used to tell him when he was a little baby! Truly, our children inherit so much more than just our genes. They learn from what we say and do...

Here is a question worth pondering as we imagine Mary and Joseph's travel down to Bethlehem through Samaria. Where is our Samaria and who are our Samaritans? Who in our own community, in our nation, in the world make us feel uncomfortable, unsafe, and threatened? Are they the homeless, sleeping on our streets? Are they the undocumented in our communities, living in fear? Are they the migrants, unwelcomed and denied at the borders?

Like any other Jew of his time, Jesus could have ignored and avoided the Samaritans. It would have been the legal thing to do for a Jewish Rabbi. Yet, he overcame his society's prejudice towards Samaria and its people, reaching out to them and embracing them as God's children. As his followers, we ought to learn from his example and do as he did.

Coming back to Joseph and Mary's travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, while we do not know exactly which route they took, we do know this: going from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a 7-10 days journey by walk, was not an easy trip to make for anyone, let alone a pregnant woman in her third trimester!

The beginning of Mary and Joseph's journey would have been relatively easy going as they descended from the hills of Nazareth. But, after that, it would have gotten more and more challenging as they ascended and descended through the hills and mountains. Then, the last part of their trip would have been

the most difficult as they traveled through the hot and dry region of the country before reaching their final destination.

I am sure it was not a journey that Mary wanted to take. Taking such an arduous trip in her pregnancy, going from her hometown, where everyone knew her to a town where no one knew about her except that she was the soon-to-be wife of Joseph would have been quite unnerving and frightening. But, it would not be the last such trip she had to take. Not long after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph were forced to migrate to Egypt with their newborn baby as refugees escaping the rampant violence and death in their country. And Mary's most difficult trip would come about 30 years later, when she followed her son on the way to his crucifixion.

Like Mary and Joseph, we also find ourselves taking unwanted journeys in life. We are confronted by something that we did not expect, such as a diagnosis of a serious illness, an addiction, a lay-off, a loss of friendship, a separation, a divorce, an accident, a natural disaster, a death. The list can go on and on. Surely, no one's life is without certain disappointments and regrets, sorrow and pain. But, the good news for us believers is that God never leaves us alone. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, for God is with us! God is always able to bring something good even out of the things that seem hopelessly broken. For nothing is impossible with God. We find many such stories of miraculous restoration in the Bible.

- Adam and Even did not obey God's command and were kicked out of the paradise. But, it was not the end of their story.
- Abraham and Sarah found themselves childless at the ages beyond childbearing despite their obedience and faithfulness to God. But, it was not the end of their story.
- Jacob had to leave his father's house after he deceived his father and stole his brother's birthright. But, it was not the end of his story.
- Joseph was sold by his own brothers as a slave Egypt. There, he was wrongly accused and imprisoned. But, it was not the end of his story.
- David had to flee into the wilderness because King Saul tried to kill him out of jealousy. But, it was not the end of his story.
- Elijah also had to flee into the wilderness also because king Ahab tried to kill him. But it was not the end of his story.
- People of Israel were taken to Babylon in captivity and lived there for 70 years. But, it was not the end of their story.
- People thought Jesus' vision of God's kingdom was finished when he died on the cross. But, we know it was not the end of his story.

Sometimes, we may wonder where the journeys in our lives are taking us and whether we can bear to continue walking. But, one thing we can be certain of is that God is with us, walks with us, leading and guiding us through the valleys and hills of our unwanted journeys, providing for us the nourishments that we need to continue.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, if you find yourself on an unwanted journey this season of Advent, I invite you to trust and to hope that this will not be the end of your story. Keep walking. Keep walking in trust

and in faith that God is with us. As the angelic voices announce, Emmanuel, God with us, shall soon be born. Just as Mary and Joseph persevered through their difficult journey, receiving news they did not wish to hear, God is inviting us to persevere, too in our present difficulties. May we be a community who reminds each other that we never walk alone.

Thanks be to God!