

Challenging: From Nazareth to Bethlehem (Advent 4)

Luke 2:1-7 & Zechariah 9:11-12

Call to Worship: John 1:1-5

December 19, 2021

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

In our book that we're studying (*The Journey*, by Adam Hamilton), the author describes today's story in terms of a journey that Mary and Joseph—especially Mary—is not excited to take. And “not excited” is generous. She's unhappy, crestfallen, disappointed, scared, apprehensive, and probably a little angry with Joseph. It's a long, demanding, uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous journey. She's already dealt with so much and had settled down in Nazareth, waiting the last few days and weeks before the baby arrived. Now—of all times, now—they have to journey to Bethlehem, because they are at the mercy of the Roman Empire, which is notoriously unmerciful. There's no exemption for pregnant women imminently expecting delivery.

I remember when we were expecting Anna, I got a jury summons in the mail. I was talking to my grandmother that afternoon, bemoaning the fact that I had to drag my pregnant self alllll the way to the county seat, which was all of sixteen miles away by car, to show up for jury duty. She said, indignantly, “Well, you shouldn't have to go. You're a”...then she kind of spluttered and finished up...”you're a busy woman!” Yes, I was busy. And exhausted as pregnant people tend to be. But I still had to show up for jury duty. That was a journey, trivial though it seems in comparison to Mary's, that I had to take. There wasn't an exemption.

Literal, physical journeys tend to be much easier for us than they were for Joseph and Mary. Sure, we complain about airlines and leg room and crummy snacks, and the price of gas, and how many suitcases our family members think it necessary to bring along. But wow, how much easier and safer it is for us to take actual journeys. It's easy for us to access food and drinking water. We fill up our cars and don't have to worry about making sure our animals have food and water. We don't have to worry about bandits accosting us along the way. So we can *imagine* how reluctant Mary and Joseph would have been to undertake their journey, but it really is outside our experience.

Now figuratively speaking, we understand more readily, what it is like to have to undertake a long task or enter into a circumstance not of our choosing, that kind of difficult journey, we understand. Mary and Joseph had each, as we've

discussed, had to accept God's call to this journey of being the parents of the Messiah. More than other expectant parents, they had no idea what they were getting themselves into, except that the journey would bring blessings of the complicated sort, and challenges they couldn't yet foresee.

Today marks fourteen years since we brought a wee baby Anna home from the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, after 79 days there. That was a journey we hadn't anticipated, did not enjoy, and one that challenged us in ways we could not foresee. Those 79 days fade in my memory, thankfully. The challenge of those days also fades in light of the fourteen years since. Those years have been full of blessings of the complicated sort, and full of challenges we could not have foreseen.

Today also marks roughly 21 months since we realized we were in a global pandemic. We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into, did we? No idea how different we would be this many months later. No idea how long this would last. We still have no idea on much of those things. There hasn't been any exemptions granted, no way not to participate, no way to opt out. These months have been full of blessings of the complicated sort, though they've been hard to discern at times. These months have been full of challenges we could not have foreseen. We still don't know.

Some of us have been sent on challenging journeys this year. Some of us are grieving the loss of a spouse. Some of us are grieving the loss of a sibling. Many of us are grieving the loss of friends. Some of us faced extreme weather and had to cope in ways we had never imagined doing. Some of us are exhausted with what a friend of mine calls the "darn dailies," the things that we have to do just to exist every day, things that have become tedious and draining. None of us have escaped challenges. These journeys have brought blessings of the complicated sort. And challenges we might have foreseen but hoped we could escape.

The journeys that we've talked about today: Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, the journey you take when your child or family member is hospitalized, the journey of the pandemic, the journeys of grief, journeys of illnesses of various kinds. These journeys aren't voluntary. To extend the metaphor, they aren't vacations that we plan in advance and can choose to take or not. These journeys aren't even spontaneous trips, where we just throw some flip flops in the car, grab a snack, call a friend, and go to the beach.

As we remember Mary's and Joseph's visits from the angel, as we remember their preparation and acceptance of God's call to this journey that they share, we need to remember a few things about these journeys we are on. First,

there don't seem to be exemptions or ways to wiggle out of them. These journeys are just the way things are for now, for this season, for an undetermined period of time. Though we have the choice to fight them or accept them, to look back and see God preparing us for this particular journey, we don't have the choice to leave or opt out of them.

Second, though we learned last week that blessings are complicated and likely to also contain challenges and heartache and hardship, those blessings are real and true.

And lastly, and most importantly, we remember from Mary and Joseph and from our own experience and from the stories of our ancestors in the faith, we don't take these journeys by ourselves. God is with us. That is the good news of Christmas, Emmanuel, God-with-us. There are decisions we make within these journeys that seem to us like they are life-changing decisions, or at least drastically different paths we might take, and we wonder which is the correct decision. There may be a correct decision. And there may not be. No matter what path we take on whatever journey we are on, we can't choose a path where God is absent. God is here with us, within our journeys, no matter how challenging. No matter how complicated and hidden the blessings. God is with us.