

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4th Sunday Advent

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December 21, 2014

Text: Luke 2:1-7

Title: "From Nazareth to Bethlehem: Perseverance"

Lynn and I celebrated our 30th anniversary, as many of you know, with a trip to Scotland. Lynn's grandfather was just a young boy when his family emigrated to the U.S. from Scotland and so it has always held an allure for her as she grew up hearing stories and meeting family that came to the U.S. for a visit. So the trip was about exploring where her grandfather came from, seeing the sights of his—and her--family of origin.

As a history major I was also drawn to Scotland, having read about the great conflicts that occurred on the island between the English and the Scots, the castles, the lochs, and of course, the haggis for which the land is so famous.

So we saved for years in order to make it happen. As time came closer we began planning where we wanted to go. I did the research for places to stay and made reservations in Edinburgh for the first week and a cottage on the North Sea in a little fishing village called Johnshaven for the second week. We put lists together of what we would take, made sure we had an electrical convertor so we could charge camera batteries and gadgets, made inquiries with Verizon about getting a phone that worked in Europe because they use different wireless technology than in the U.S., and checked with our credit union about how to deal with paying for things. Since we had never been on a trip overseas that wasn't a tour, we both wanted to be able to freelance this time around, and so I checked into renting a car and the requirements necessary for driving. A lot of time and thought went into this trip. And as we made these preparations, we were excited. This had been a lifelong dream for Lynn, and I was right there with her and couldn't wait to drive on the wrong side of the road. This was just an exciting journey to be on. It was something we had wanted to do, a place we wanted to go and we couldn't wait. We were pumped.

But that's not the way it is with all life journeys, is it? There are some trips we don't want to take, like driving to the unemployment office as a result of a layoff or termination, or to the lawyer after learning your spouse is seeking divorce, or to the county jail to visit a child you've put your heart and soul into but she just can't seem to get her life together, or walking to the principal's office knowing your parents are going to be called for something you did wrong. There are some trips that are painful to take. Some of them are the result of our own doing. Some are forced upon us. Yet who hasn't faced a situation that meant undertaking some kind of journey we would rather not take? When we find ourselves on such a journey, where do we find meaning and strength? Where do we find God?

We've been thinking about journeys this Advent season: Mary's visit Elizabeth; Joseph's journey from wanting to divorce Mary quietly to embracing God's promise in the baby to be born. This morning we consider Joseph and Mary's trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem when she is bulging with child.

I doubt Lynn and I would have chosen to take that trip to Scotland had she been in her last months

of pregnancy, but Mary and Joseph had no choice. Augustus, the Emperor of Rome, issued a decree. A decree is a formal and authoritative order, and this one was issued by an emperor who considered himself—and was considered by others to be--the son of god. This was so because Augustus came to power at a time when the Roman Empire was in turmoil. Julius Caesar, his great uncle, had been murdered when Augustus was 19 years old. There followed a tumultuous struggle for power among leaders like Mark Antony and Lepidus, Brutus and Cassius. War was on-going in this vying for power as a result of the power vacuum created by Caesar's death. Augustus eventually came out on top, but people were pessimistic about the great empire. They were weary of war, and the sense of identity of Rome as a great world power was waning. Even their religious practices were dissolving.

But Augustus restored confidence in Rome's leadership again by renewing a sense of mission to rule the world. He established order and expanded the empire into Spain and Germania. He addressed social problems in Rome dealing with water and food supplies. He dealt with civic order by establishing a permanent fire brigade and police force. He had an extensive road system built in order to better utilize military control over provinces. He rebuilt Rome including the temple of Mars, the senate house, and eighty two other temples. Statues of him were erected throughout the city. As a result of all of this, Augustus came to be called the savior of Rome and, as I shared a few weeks ago, his mother was said to have gone into the temple of Apollo and while she was asleep in the temple, a snake came and wrapped itself around her and she became pregnant. Therefore, Augustus came to be called son of god. And, of course, he appointed officials for taxation, which brings us back to Joseph and Mary who--it turns out--were forced for taxing purposes to make the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem because the so-called savior of Rome and son of god ordered them to go where--it turns out--the true Son of God and Savior would be born just a babe in a feeding trough.

I wonder how we would feel if told by the government that we had to travel 8 or 9 days—an estimate of how long the 80 mile journey would have taken Mary and Joseph on foot—in order for the government to tax us more effectively? Would you happily comply? I doubt it. I can imagine anger, resentment, feeling oppressed by the occupying conquerors. Add to that the fact that Mary is heavy with pregnancy and it becomes even more untenable. I remember how uncomfortable Lynn was when she was 8 months pregnant. Both of us couldn't wait for it to be over. Supposing that Mary was in the final month or so of pregnancy I can't imagine making an 80 mile journey with her on foot, which may be why at some point in the Christian journey a donkey was added to the Christmas story although the Bible itself never mentions one. Walking that far in that state hardly seems possible.

So unlike our trip to Scotland to celebrate our anniversary, the planning for this trip I suspect was not done with excitement. I doubt they would have made such a journey if they had a choice. They didn't have to think about electrical convertors or cell phone conversions, but they did have to consider the basics like food and water and shelter along the way.

Those of you participating in the study of The Journey know that Adam Hamilton points out that there were two possible routes they could have taken. One was a longer route to avoid the northern area of Samaria that lay between Nazareth and Bethlehem. Samaria was commonly avoided as a result of deep historical conflicts with the people of Samaria. It would have added about 2 days to their journey. The other route would take them directly through Samaria and as I said earlier it's about an 80 mile distance that would have taken them 8 or 9 days on foot. Hamilton suggests in the study—and I agree--that Mary and Joseph likely would have chosen the shorter route as a result of Mary's state.

I also wonder if Mary and Joseph travelled this route because they chose not to harbor the bitterness and ancient hatred for the Samaritans that their fellow Jews carried and practiced and that their unwillingness to do so expressed itself in their son who later also refused to harbor ancient hatred as he taught and healed. Was this unwanted trip they were on a precursor of Jesus' desire to heal the harboring of anger based on past grievances? Was this already a symbolic act of forgiveness about which Jesus

would later proclaim was necessary: 70 times 7?

I can't say for certain, but it is consistent with the One who would tell the parable of the Good Samaritan and who would speak with a woman at Jacob's well in Samaria offering her living water, telling her

²³...the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4).

If Mary and Joseph took this route, then it is probable that they drew water from the same well because the journey would have required them to plan their trip according to available water sources which wasn't available at the nearest gas station. Maybe this unwanted trip was God's way of beginning the work of the Son of God before he was even born. God already breaking down barriers built by human anger as a result of conflict over one thing or another. God already crossing boundaries fixed by hatred and suspicions through the perseverance of a young couple simply doing what they are told.

Imagine, then, Mary and Joseph crossing into enemy territory on foot or by donkey from the gentler hills in Galilee to the more rugged mountains of Samaria and Judea to the arid landscape of the Judean wilderness near Bethlehem. We like to think of the Christmas story nostalgically knowing how the story turns out. We like to think of the silent night peace, but this story really isn't very peaceful. As I said I can hardly imagine taking my wife in the last trimester of her pregnancy on an 80 mile journey on foot. I can imagine Mary uncomfortable as could be complaining to Joseph or maybe even to God, wondering how God supposedly blessed her with this child but then being forced to take this arduous journey in order to be taxed. "Why God would you do this to me? You bless me with this child but then we're forced to make this trip? Why?"

This is a story of perseverance: two people enduring the indignity of a callous ruler in order to live into the promise of God. That promise would be born in Bethlehem, which means in Hebrew "the house of bread". He would be laid in a manger, which was a feeding trough—likely carved out of stone—for animals like sheep or maybe even the donkey on which Mary may have ridden. This babe would grow to refer to himself as the bread of life, so the bread of life was born in the house of bread and coddled in a feeding trough, a metaphor for the invitation we all receive to feed on him in our hearts. Likely born in a cave where animals were routinely kept only later to be resurrected from a cave.

It was a trip not chosen by Mary and Joseph but they persevered, trusting in the promise of God and that trust changed the world. That trust can change us.

I love the last verse of a carol we'll be singing in the 7 & 11 p.m. Christmas Eve services, "O, Little Town of Bethlehem". Sing it with me...

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
o come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!

Have you ever been on a journey you did not want to take? Maybe you're on such a journey now. As you persevere, can you trust that God is with you, within you, born in you, that you are not alone? If

you have completed such a journey, are there places in which you can see God at work along the way in spite of the difficulties of the journey and in spite of being unable to discern God's purpose or place in it? Are there places in which you can now see that God was born along the way?

Meister Eckert was a Christian mystic who lived between the years 1260-1328. Of Jesus being born in us he rightly points out: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us."