

THEME: Journey to Bethlehem

"From Nazareth to Bethlehem"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – based on a sermon series by Adam Hamilton

December 22-23, 2012 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

Luke 2:1-7

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

VIDEO From Nazareth to Bethlehem Sermon Starter

SLIDE From Nazareth to Bethlehem

Please take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. The message notes are a place for you to write anything down you'd like to remember from today's message and there are some lines below the Scripture readings that we have for this morning. The meditation moments are your chance to read the Scriptures on your own this week and spend some time reflecting on what they might mean for you today as we move through Christmas and celebrate the birth of Christ.

Today we continue on a journey that we began four weeks ago. We have been retracing the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We've been trying to look at the Christmas story with fresh eyes using archaeology, geography, history and theology. We have been asking three basic questions each week of this sermon series. **What does this part of the Christmas story teach us about the character of God? What does this part of the Christmas story teach us about the child whose birth we celebrate in just a few days? Finally, what does this part of the Christmas story teach us about ourselves?**

The message today is really one that over arches this entire sermon series and that is the reality that every one of us takes journeys that we never intended to take, or even wanted to take. We are going to ponder this reality of taking a journey that we don't want to take and how God fits into that.

SLIDE Map of Holy Land

Let's remember where we've been so far in this sermon series. Take out of your bulletin the map of the holy land which you will find inside and on the video screens. For those of you who might not have been with us over the past few weeks let me give you our bearings. You see the Mediterranean Sea over on the left. The Sea of Galilee is part of the top one third of the map known as the Galilee which is where Nazareth is located. You see the Jordan River flowing out of the Sea of Galilee and into the Dead Sea at the lower portion of the map. The middle section is known as Samaria which today is the West Bank where many of the Palestinians live. The South is Judea which contains the town of Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

The journey begins in Nazareth, the hometown of Mary, nine months before Jesus is born. Mary is may be 14 or 15 years old and she is a peasant in a town which doesn't even show up on first century maps. It is an insignificant and inconsequential town with maybe 100 people in it. The messenger of God, Gabriel, comes to Mary and tells her that she is going to have a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. She ends this conversation with that messenger saying, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, may it be with me according to your word."

In the second week of the series we went to Bethlehem which is located at the bottom of your map, 6 miles from Jerusalem. Joseph is from Bethlehem and he is a Carpenter. He is not a master Carpenter but simply someone who builds doors or windows or furniture. His entire wealth would've fit in his toolbox. He is engaged to be married to Mary in what was probably an arranged marriage and he finds out that she is pregnant and he knows that he is not the father. This turned his world upside down, but when he goes to sleep that night he has a dream and a messenger from God appears to him and says, "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will have a son and you will call him Jesus." Joseph awakens from the dream and Matthew tells us that he did take Mary to be his wife.

Last weekend we followed Mary again as she took a journey immediately after discovering that she was with child. Before she told anyone that she was pregnant, she traveled to a modern-day suburb of Jerusalem which is the village of Ein Karem. You see that on the map just left of Bethlehem. This is where Mary's cousin Elizabeth lived, along with her husband Zachariah who is a priest. They are an older couple who were not able to have children but found themselves pregnant in her old age. It was a miraculous pregnancy for Elizabeth and she would give birth to John the Baptist. Mary spends time with Elizabeth and Zachariah and it is there that she find encouragement and hope. Elizabeth tells Mary that she is blessed and Mary sings her beautiful Magnificat, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has done great things for me."

SLIDE Zoomed in Map with Bethlehem and Ein Karem

As we zoom in on the map you will notice how close in proximity Ein Karam, where Elizabeth and Zachariah live, is to Bethlehem, which is where Joseph lives. What do you think the chances are that Joseph's fiancé Mary is only a days walk away for those three months and she never visited him? I think the chances are probably zero and that is likely that Joseph and Mary see each other while Mary is visiting Elizabeth. He finds out during that meeting that Mary is pregnant and it is then that he has the dream telling them to take Mary as his wife.

Matthew and Luke tell us two different things in their gospels about what happens next. Matthew's gospel tells us that Joseph awakens immediately from his dream and he takes Mary to be his wife. Luke's gospel tells us that Mary and Joseph remained engaged until the baby was born and it is implied that the wedding took place after the birth of Christ. My sense is that Matthew gives us a clear picture of this and that Mary and Joseph then travel back to Nazareth from Ein Karam, along with some of Joseph's family, in about the fourth month of Mary's pregnancy. Remember that this is about a nine days walk from Ein Karam to Nazareth and it is there that they have a "hurry-up" wedding.

You understand what kind of wedding this is, don't you? I officiated at several hundred weddings as a pastor and I had several "hurry up" weddings where the wedding was supposed to be a year down the road and instead it needed to happen quicker because of unforeseen circumstances. My guess is that is exactly the kind of wedding that Mary and Joseph had in the first century, which

may have had a touch of shame. That really is not an issue today but my guess is that it was for Mary and Joseph and their families.

So here we have Mary having traveled nine days in the first month of her pregnancy to visit Elizabeth, then telling her husband to be that she is pregnant and the baby is not his, then traveling nine more days back to her hometown of Nazareth when she is four months pregnant along with her new in-laws, then having a shotgun wedding that probably was done quietly because of the shame that was felt. I am guessing this is not how she plans her wedding or how she pictured her life turning out. It is not the way it was supposed to be, especially for Mary who considered herself a righteous young woman, keeping herself pure as she followed the rules and laws of her culture and faith tradition. None of this is happening according to the plan that she had in her own mind about how her first years of marriage would unfold. This is that journey that you don't want to take but you find yourself having to take.

After this shotgun wedding it is time to start planning for having a baby. They no doubt started doing all the things that you might do if you are pregnant today. In today's world, you actually interview your OB/GYN to see if they will be the one that you want to deliver your baby. In the first century you would interview a midwife and decide which one you trusted more, because remember that many women died during childbirth and so you wanted someone who is very skilled to help you through that process. Today we have beautiful birthing rooms in the hospital which are even more comfortable than the labor and delivery rooms that my mother had to use, which were very sterile. The rooms today have home theater systems and massaging chairs and gourmet cookies that are served to you when you're ready for them.

Mary and Joseph would also chosen a place to have the baby, such as the most comfortable room in the house. Remember that these are life and death decisions for them since many women died during childbirth in the first century. Fathers to be today often train how to coach their wives to breathe and to find their "happy place" in the midst of the childbirth process. Joseph would have played that role but he would have been coached and mentored about how to be a good father when the time came. Mary and Joseph settle into Nazareth, making all of these decisions and preparing for the birth of their son. It is all planned out, just like it would be for you. You don't wait for the ninth month of the pregnancy

to plan things out, but you plan things out in advance when you're going to have a child today.

But in the late eighth month or early part of the ninth month of the pregnancy, the unthinkable happens for a young couple preparing for the birth of their first child. Word comes down from the Emperor Caesar Augustus that everyone in Judea and Syria has to go back to the hometown of the head of each household, which is the husband, in order to be registered and counted in the census.

SLIDE The Census

When Luke tells us this, he is trying to tell us several very important things. First, he is reminding us that Palestine, the holy land, was an occupied territory of the Roman Empire. The people who lived in this part of the world were not free. These people did what the Romans told them to do. When the Romans told them to jump the Jews were to say, "How high?" Most of them were not citizens and did not have any rights within the Roman Empire. According to the Roman Empire, this part of the world was seen as the lowest place within the Empire.

We are reminded once more that God chose to come and be born into human flesh on this Earth in a backwater corner of the Roman Empire to peasants who were third class citizens in their own country. That made them fourth or fifth class citizens in the Roman Empire. They were nobodies from nowhere and this is where God chose to be born.

Why do you think Emperor Augustus commands for everyone to go back to their hometown to be registered? Why do people need to be counted? The issue was taxes. The Romans wanted to know how many able-bodied men lived in Bethlehem and the regions surrounding their so they knew how much taxes to levy against each region, which then the tax collectors would be responsible for collecting. It was all about taxes which is very interesting because in the past few weeks, as we have drawn closer to Christmas here in our own country, the discussion has been about the very same thing some 2000 years later and that is taxes and who should pay how much!

Mary and Joseph then must take a 10 day journey from Nazareth back to Bethlehem and my guess is that Mary was thinking, "Why didn't we just stay there five months ago?" The reality is that the Emperor doesn't care if you are nine months pregnant. The Emperor doesn't care if you're sick or if you've lost a loved

one. The Emperor only cares about getting his money and making sure he is getting the right amount from each territory.

What you think Mary is thinking now? At least in Nazareth she had things planned out and knew where she was going to give birth and who was going to be present for that. But now it is all thrown up in the air. She doesn't know a midwife in Bethlehem and probably won't have time to pick one out anyway. She is going to be there in 10 days and have to make all the arrangements she has been making over the last few months in a matter of days. My guess is she's feeling very discouraged in this moment. Let's hear from Nicole Conrad about what it is like to be nine months pregnant.

VIDEO Pregnant Woman Interview

SLIDE From Nazareth the Bethlehem

Mary has Shrek feet and ankles. She is uncomfortable. She is scared and doesn't know anybody where she is going. Anxiety is off the charts as her husband Joseph tells her they are going to Bethlehem.

What you think Mary is praying about this time? Let's remember that this story is not about some perfect, idyllic scene. We learned last year that this was not a silent night. I think Mary might have been praying, "God, how could you? You came and you asked and I offered my body to you. I offered myself and said I would carry this child. I said, here I am a handmaiden of the Lord. I took the shame and I got married before I was supposed to get married. They changed my entire wedding plans even though people were looking at me and whispering about me when I walk by. I took all of that, and you couldn't let me have the baby in Nazareth? You had to take that away too? What did I do that was so wrong that you had to do this to me? Why is this happening? Why God, did you change the Emperor's mind? Why did you not protect me from this? How could you let this happen to me?"

Don't you think she might've prayed something like that? She's getting ready to leave her hometown and head to Bethlehem and I'm guessing that she had some doubts and some hesitations and some good questions for God. This is the journey that I don't think Mary wanted to take.

SLIDE Map of Palestine in time of Jesus

There are two possible routes that Mary and Joseph took as they made their way from Nazareth down to Bethlehem. The first you find on the video screen, where they would have crossed the Jordan River just below the Sea of Galilee and then traveled down the Jordan River Valley until re-crossing the River near Jericho and heading over towards Jerusalem and then Bethlehem from the East. The reason they would've taken this route is that it would have taken them around Samaria which is the middle section of the country.

If Mary and Joseph were seen as third class citizens then the Samaritans were known as fourth and fifth class citizens. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews and they were not considered God's people. The two groups didn't like each other and it's interesting that the land that was Samaria in the first century is today Palestine and the West Bank and today the Palestinians and the Jewish people have the same disagreement going on in the same places.

In the first century, many historians have suggested that Jews felt like they would be unclean by walking through the land of the Samaritans. Instead, they would walk along the border of Samaria, crossed the Jordan River and then reenter the holy land after they had passed the land of the Samaritans, entering in around the city of Jericho. Many people did do that which is why some scholars say that Mary and Joseph took this route that you see on the dotted line on the map in your bulletin today.

Other scholars argue that Mary and Joseph took the more direct route going from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We don't know for sure but let me suggest a few reasons why they may have actually traveled through Samaria. This route is marked by the solid line on the map in your bulletin and on the video screen. This route takes them through the Jezreel Valley and then taken the route of the patriarchs which is an ancient highway that traverses the hilltops. They finally would've come down to Bethlehem with a more direct approach.

The Jewish Roman historian Josephus from the first century tells us that most Jews took the direct route when they were traveling down the middle of the country for the Festival days. In other words, it was not unusual for Jewish people to travel through Samaria. The second reason that I think is more likely they traveled this more direct route is because of the practicality of it. If you take the indirect route which takes you around Samaria then you add 20 miles to the journey which would add at least two days of travel and possibly three because you are walking up hills and on uneven pathways and Mary was nine months

pregnant to boot. The journey would have already taken 10 days and if you add 20 miles to it you are adding another two or three days with a woman who was ready to give birth and it seems more logical to take the shortest route possible.

In order to go outside of Samaria and take the indirect route you had to have a certain view of this Samaritan people. You had to see them as unclean. You had to look at them in a certain way in order to not pass through their country. If you remember from John's gospel, when Jesus began his public ministry in John chapter 4, he traveled right through the heart of the country. Sometimes we miss this important fact when we are reading the Gospels, but looking at how Jesus began his ministry I think it tells us something about him and his upbringing. He was willing to walk through the middle of Samaria. What does that tell you about Jesus and about his heart and how he looked at people?

While on that journey he comes to a woman at a well who is Samaritan and has been divorced five times and she is now living with a man who is not her husband. Jesus asks for a drink of water and she gives him one and then Jesus says, "Woman, if you ask it of me I would give you living water and you would never be thirsty again." Jesus then sends her out to be the first missionary and she takes the word of God to her own people, the Samaritans.

Where do you think Jesus learned that you don't treat some people as though they are second-class citizens? I think he learned that from his mother and father who raised him to look at people without bias as he was growing up. I think Mary and Joseph traveled through the center of the country because they didn't look at the Samaritans as second-class.

Finally, by traveling down the center of the country Mary and Joseph were traveling the route of the Patriarchs which is like going back in time and recounting the entire Old Testament story. As you begin that route down through the Jezreel Valley you are traveling the same route that Abraham traveled when he came to the holy land. This is where God makes a covenant with Abraham and as they travel this route they are remembering that they are traveling in Abraham and Sarah's footsteps. When you arrive in the middle of Samaria you come to the place where Jacob saw the ladder with angels ascending and descending. They would've passed the place where Joseph the patriarch, the son of Israel, was buried when his bones were brought back from Egypt.

This is the same route that the Assyrians traveled when they came into the northern kingdom of Israel and took the Jewish people away into slavery and exile, never to be heard from again. They walked the same journey as the Babylonian army did when they invaded Jerusalem and Judea and carried people away as captives into exile and slavery. This is the same route that the exiles used to return, singing about a return to Zion as the prophets had foretold. They are passing the same route upon which the prophet Elijah traveled. They passed the town where the Ark of the Covenant was before Jerusalem was the capital city. The people believe that this is the place where God dwelt.

I wonder if Mary, who was nine months pregnant with the Messiah in her belly, who was going to be the culmination of God's saving work, recognized that this was the climax of God saving work in the world. She is taking this journey and recounting the story while the Messiah in her womb is passing through all of God's saving work up to the moment when he would be born in Bethlehem. Let's take a look at what this journey looks like as he traveled through the middle of the holy land.

VIDEO Judean Journey

This is Nazareth and you can see this Jezreel Valley in the background. The Valley is flat and beautiful and lush. There is a slight incline at the end of the Valley which takes you through thousands of olive trees that would have been there even in the first century. Four or five days out they would come to the mountains where they would walk along the ridge Road which is a divide sending water on one side to the Mediterranean sea and the other side into the Jordan River. Next you will see the Judean wilderness or the desert which, if they had taken the alternative route around Samaria, would've taken them right to the middle of this desert. If they took the more direct route they would just skirt the edge of it. Finally, they would've come to the town of Bethlehem that would've looked like the small village that you see in the foreground of this shot. The background is modern-day Bethlehem.

SLIDE From Nazareth to Bethlehem

This finally takes us to Bethlehem where Mary is beginning contractions. I know that some of you might think that it wasn't too bad because Mary was on a donkey, but let me remind you that there is no mention of the donkey in the Scriptures. We've added that to make ourselves feel better even though it might

be reasonable that she would've had something to ride upon. I imagine that Joseph may have found some way for her not to have to walk most of the way. Maybe she could've used a cart to sit in but even with that I am not sure that it makes this a pleasant or comfortable ride if you're nine months pregnant and beginning contractions.

The way we often see this story is that we think of Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem and coming to the Bethlehem Best Western hotel and Joseph being the typical guy who has not made a reservation. They find that all of the rooms are taken because of all the other people who were traveling back to Bethlehem for the census. But the innkeeper has compassion upon this couple and he gives them the keys to the parking garage. This is where the mode of transportation is and it would've held the donkeys and camels and such.

We do know from the story that Mary gave birth in the parking garage or the stable in the first century. What does it tell you about the character of God that he came to a peasant couple, a woman from a village that didn't even make it onto the maps in an occupied country where the people were fourth class citizens in the Roman Empire and that wasn't low enough? When the Word became flesh he was born in a parking garage with animals. What does that tell you about the character and the heart of God? Does it tell you that he associates with the lowly and the least and the last and the lost?

I love this part of the story but I am not sure that Mary loved it when she arrived in Bethlehem. There is a part in this place in the story where I think we might get it wrong when we tell the story. Luke tells us that there was no room at the inn which is why she laid her baby in a manger or a feeding trough. That word "inn" in Greek is *kataluma*.

SLIDE “inn” = *kataluma* = “guest chamber”

This word only appears three times in the Gospels. The other two times are when Jesus sends his disciples ahead to go find a house and ask the house owner where there is a guestroom that he can prepare a Last Supper or the Passover Seder. This word *kataluma* does mean a place of lodging but most often what it meant was the guestroom or the guest chamber in someone's house. It was a room where you could lodge family who came in from out-of-town and they could stay with you.

Some of you asked me at Christmas time that if Joseph was from Bethlehem then why did they have to go to an inn when they arrived? Why do they have to have the baby out in the stable when they should've gone to Joseph family's house? I actually had a couple come up and ask me that question several years ago. The man actually asked the question and his wife quickly responded that she would rather have a baby in a barn than at his parent's house so she could understand where Mary was coming from!

The answer is that they actually did go to Joseph's house. When they arrived there were already 10 or 12 or 15 or maybe even 20 who are part of the family who had to come back to register in Bethlehem for the census. They arrived several days before Mary and Joseph because Joseph and Mary were pregnant and it took them longer. There were already lots of family staying in the guestroom or the guest chamber or the inn. When it comes time to make a decision, of course they would have given up the room and all gone to sleep in the barn, but there is a reason why scholars believe that this didn't happen.

When a woman gave birth she became ritually unclean because of the contact of blood and bodily fluids. The room where she gave birth would also be considered ceremonially unclean. In fact, the entire house would have become ritually impure or unclean when she gave birth for seven days afterwards. If she gave birth in the guestroom then the entire house would become unclean.

Instead, Joseph's parents may have said, "What if we set up a space in the barn. We know it's not perfect, but we think you will have more privacy and then the barn will be unclean and not the rest of the house." It may not have even been about what was clean or unclean but rather more about privacy and giving this couple room and space. This might be hard to imagine until you see a home from this time period. Let me show you a diagram of the house from the first century. You will find these all over in the holy land in archaeological excavations.

SLIDE Floor Plan of house in Bethlehem

First, you would find a kitchen, dining and common space. You enter the house in the front and there may have been an oven or a cistern to collect rainwater at the front end of the great room. There is one primary bedroom that you can see is located behind the common space. If it was a poor family this would've been the only room and everyone would be sleeping in these particular quarters. However, most houses would've had one guestroom called the *kataluma* located in an upper area of the house. The children may have slept here

most of the time but when there was company, the children slept with their parents in the sleeping quarters and the guests would have slept in the guestroom. Joseph's family may have had 10 to 15 people or more sleeping in the upper guestroom.

Behind the house, attached to it or perhaps underneath it in what we would consider a basement or a cave would be to the stable. There wouldn't be stairs but rather a ramp that would go down in the place where you would keep the donkeys and camels and other livestock. We think that it was in this place that Mary gave birth, adjacent to the house because there was no room in the guestroom.

So here is Mary having taken a journey that she didn't want to. She arrives in Bethlehem and there is no room in the guestroom. She is now having her contractions and I am imagining that as she is lying on the floor of the barn there are tears, not of pain but of disappointment. This is not how she pictured it would be. This is not the way it was supposed to happen. I imagine she is thinking something like, "God if I'm special to you then why is all of this happening in this way?"

Mary can't yet see the shepherds who will arrive shortly, who will minister to her and to her child. She can't see what it will be like when she holds that baby in her arms and feed him for the first time from her breast. She doesn't know that the wise men have already been traveling for months to get to Bethlehem to bring her gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. She can't see any of that yet through her tears and her disappointment.

She doesn't know that in 2000 years a part of this story that will be most compelling to many people will be the fact that this all happened in a barn. She has no idea that God will use this to teach us something about God's character and the character of her child who cares for the least and the last and the lost. She can't see any of that perspective because all she probably knows is that this is a journey that she didn't want to take.

SLIDE We all take journeys that we don't want to take sometimes.

Something that has struck me about this story in the past week and a half has been the reality that there are many who have to take a journey they don't want to take. That's part of life. There are parents who have lost their children in

an unfathomable and horrific manner in Newtown, Connecticut and they are taking a journey that none of us would want to take.

It is not that God made Mary and Joseph take this journey or that he wants parents to lose their children. The Emperor made Mary and Joseph take this journey and a mentally ill person with access to guns took those parents on a journey that none of us would want to take, but do you think God ever left them? Do you think God abandoned them? Or do you think that God was with them on this journey even when they couldn't feel it? Do you think that God simply wasn't concerned with Mary and Joseph? Or do you think that God took every part of this story, even the painful parts of the journey, and used it in a redemptive way, to create a story that we would still tell 2000 years later to reveal God's character and God's heart to us halfway across the globe for generation after generation.

The Emperor was only after money but in the midst of that God used it to fulfill a prophecy so that Magi would know where to come to present their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. This is what God does. **God doesn't protect us from all the bad things that are going to happen in this world.** We know that we talk about that all the time here in this place. **God doesn't keep us from having to make journeys that we don't want to make.** God's people have always had to take journeys they didn't want to take. What God does do is promised to walk with us on those journeys. God promises to bring from them something good where it seems like only evil is going to win. God works to cause all things to come together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes.

You could almost describe the entire Bible is one long journey that nobody wanted to take. Joseph was the son of Israel and was the favorite son but was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers because they were jealous and didn't like his arrogance. When he is in Egypt he is falsely accused of something that he didn't do and ends up in prison. He didn't want to take that journey. But in the end he becomes a leader in Egypt and he saves everyone by sharing food in Egypt that is stored up and helping those in Israel who are starving because of the great famine. His own family is saved and when he gets to the end of his life he looks back and he says, "I thank God that I was sold as a slave. I thank God that I was wrongfully imprisoned. What those who wanted to harm me intended for evil, God used for good. God redeemed my life and brought about something miraculous through it."

Before David became King he was hunted by King Saul who didn't want to turn over the kingdom to the next ruler. David is chased out into the wilderness and he stays out there for several years running away from the Philistines. He writes Psalm after Psalm complaining and asking, "Why God do you allow my enemies to prosper? When are you going to save me from this? Remember the dead don't pray to God so help me!"

But always at the end of those Psalms of complaint he finishes with, ***"Yet, I will trust in your unfailing love."***

The reality is that each one of us are going to take journeys that we don't want to take and what we learn from Mary and Joseph and all of these other characters in the Bible is that we hold on with white knuckles even through difficult moments knowing that God will walk with us. We trust that God will redeem even the painful parts of our lives and in that we are being molded and shaped and prepared for eternity with God. The challenge is to simply say, ***"God, I know you didn't bring this thing that happened in my life, but I'm trusting that you're walking with me and I'm not alone. I am trusting that you are going to take this and bring something good from it. I am giving it to you and saying, 'Please Lord, bring something good from this.'"***

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were told by King Nebuchadnezzar to bow down and worship him. They said, "We will not bow down and worship you. We trust that our God is able to deliver us from even you. Even if he doesn't, we will not bow down to you and your image because you are funny looking." They marched into the fiery furnace and inside there is a fourth man, like the Son of Man, in the furnace delivering them. Daniel marches to the lion's den in a journey that he didn't want to take but trusting that God would be with him. The Jewish people were carried off into exile by the Babylonian army and they sang songs of lament, still praising God and trusting that he was with them, knowing that one day they would return—and 50 years later God would bring them back singing in Zion, the City of God.

In the New Testament we find the apostle Paul tied up on the ship and headed for Rome where he is to be beheaded when he says, "I trust that God will either deliver me in this life or into the kingdom of heaven. Even if I die I trust that God will use my death for God's glory to help others with their eyes and see the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

The worst journey happens 33 years after the birth of Jesus, when he carries a slab of wood on his shoulders, walking towards Calvary and crucifixion. God will use that death for the salvation of the world and then on the third day he will be raised from the dead and the world will know that even death is not have power over life with God.

Some of you have lost a loved one this past year and it seemed like they were too young and it was a journey that you didn't want to take. Some of you have dealt with cancer or another illness and it took you on a journey that you didn't want to take. Some of you have been out of work for a year or more and that is a journey they didn't want to take. Some of you had that person who you never thought would leave you abandon your family for someone else and you have found yourself on a journey that you didn't want to take. Some of us have been dealing with painful issues in our families and we find ourselves on a journey that we didn't want to take.

I have read what several of the pastors who did funerals for the young children and teachers in Connecticut said during their sermons. I can't imagine having to preach in those moments but here is what I heard each of them say in their own words and it is what I would remind you of today. This is how we make it through those journeys that we don't want to take. ***We choose to have faith, and because we have faith we choose to be people of hope. The hope just doesn't well up in us in those moments but we choose to believe that there is a God. We choose to believe that God walks with us on the journeys that we don't want to take. We choose to believe that somehow God will see us through these moments where it seems like fear and evil will win. We choose to believe there is something on the other side of this life. We choose to believe that God will take the painful things in our lives and bring joy once more. We choose to believe and therefore we have hope.***

That's how the people did in the Old Testament, and that is what Mary and Joseph did and that is what we do today. We trust that our loved ones who have gone on before us are with God. We trust that God will walk with us even to the darkest valleys of the shadow of death. We trust that God will deliver us.

I have been a pastor for more than 20 years and I have been your pastor for over 10 years. I have buried some of your children. I have buried some of your spouses. I have buried some of your parents and in the midst of those moments you have asked honestly, "How am I going to get through this? I don't know how I

am going to make it." Yet, I see you many years later and joy came back in your life. There was this deep and very real pain and yet joy came back. Then, out of that pain I've seen you minister to other people and God brought something good and beautiful from the suffering that you endured. This is how God works.

There is one final point I want to make today. Sometimes, when we are walking through those dark places, we can't find faith ourselves. It is just too hard and what we need is someone who will come alongside of us and has faith for us. We need people who will come alongside of us and say, **"I know you can't see it right now, but I love you and I am with you and I'm not going to let you go and we will go to God together. I have hope for both of us."**

When we have been down a difficult and dark journey and made out the other side then we get the opportunity to walk with someone else to that dark journey. I've seen it happen time and again in this congregation, or those of you who have been through something tragic and tough have been willing to open your heart and your life story to someone else going through that same journey because they need you. I have seen lifelong friendships develop through these experiences and you have lived out what Henri Nouwen and has called, "The Wounded Healer," or you allow your wounds to heal others. You then help others have hope and faith when he can't find it on their own.

Some of you are walking through tough times right now. So hold on tight with white knuckles and say, "God, I give this to you. Please see me through." That is what Mary did on the floor that barn 2000 years ago. You have hope that a better day is coming and you trust in God even through the dark moments.

Some of you are in a really great place right now. Things are going great for you and now your job is to look around and find somebody to come alongside and say, "I have faith and hope for both of us. Let me help you through this."

I think that is God's word to us from this part of the journey to Bethlehem today. We are all going to go on journeys that we don't want to go on. God walks with us on those journeys. God redeems them and then we are called to walk alongside those who were going on those journeys who need us to bring alive faith and hope.

Would you bow your heads with me and pray?

SLIDE Prayer

While your heads are bowed, if you are walking through a tough time right now, would you consider simply pray something like this, *"God, I need you now. I need your help. I need your strength. I trust you..."*

Then you might simply pray something like this, *"Lord, please bring something good from this pain in this journey I am on right now. Please don't let the suffering be wasted in my life. Bring something good from it I pray, and I give it to you..."*

For those of you who are not walking through difficult place right now, I would invite you simply to say something like this, *"God, please help me to be a source of encouragement and blessing to those who are going through tough times. Help me to be sensitive to them. Help me to see them. Help me to give myself to encouraging them on their journey..."*

God, we pray for your help and your deliverance. We thank you that you made your home among the lowest of the low. We know that in this story Mary experiences heart ache and disappointment, and yet you sustained her. We thank you for the way that you have used this story in order to reveal your love and your will to the world. We pray that you would use our painful moments and journeys to perfect us and reveal your love to others. Help us to be the kind of people who reach out with care and love and kindness and support. Help us to be a church which is a beacon of light and hope in the darkness. To that end, we offer ourselves to you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

“From Nazareth to Bethlehem”

Theme: The Journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem

Luke 2:1-7

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David’s ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant.

And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:

Meditation Moments

Monday, December 24 – **Read Ruth 4:1-22**– Bethlehem, though fairly small, was famous in Israel’s history (unlike Nazareth, an unknown village). Matthew 1:5 listed Ruth among Jesus’ ancestors. She was from Moab, the widow of an Israelite from Bethlehem. Boaz, a kinsman of her dead husband, “redeemed” her (along with her husband’s property). They married and were King David’s great-grandparents.

- Deuteronomy 23:3 said no Moabite could ever enter “the assembly of the Lord.” But Deuteronomy 25:5-10 said if a man died childless (as Ruth’s husband did), his nearest relative should marry the widow and have an heir for the family. How do you think Boaz chose which command to follow? How did his love toward Ruth, even though she was a Moabite, show Jesus’ principle that “people are more important than rules”?
- Ruth and Naomi’s society gave unmarried women no legal rights and few ways to support themselves. A “redeemer” changed their lives. In what ways did their story foreshadow the redeeming work of Jesus, Ruth’s descendant, for all humanity?
- ***Christmas Eve services are at 2, 3:30, 5, 7, 9 and 11. Please come celebrate the birth of Christ and bring a friend!***

Tuesday, December 25 – **Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13** – In Luke’s Christmas story, on the night of Jesus’ birth the angel said, “Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior.” Today we read about David and his city. God sent Samuel, the prophet, to Bethlehem to find one of Jesse’s sons and anoint him as Israel’s ruler. Little could Samuel (or David) envision how far into the future that story would reach.

- In verses 6-7, Samuel looked at Jesse’s oldest son and thought, “This must be the one.” But God said, “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” What factors do you look at when choosing friends, a place to work, a church to attend, or even a mission project to support? What would it mean for you to base your choices on “the heart”?

- Jesse, told to bring “his sons” to meet the prophet, left David home, and seemed hesitant to call him even when Samuel asked. Have you ever been an outcast, as David seemed to be here? How can God turn even unfair experiences to good purposes?

Wednesday, December 26 – Read Micah 5:1-4 – Micah was a prophet in Jerusalem about 700 years before Christ. (Jeremiah 26:8 mentioned him.) As the armies of the mighty Assyrian Empire threatened Jerusalem, Micah looked beyond the immediate danger. God would send a deliverer, he said. This divine ruler would be born in Bethlehem, but his greatness would “reach to the ends of the earth.”

- Okay, Bethlehem we know, but what’s this “Ephrathah”? It means “fruitful,” and was the name of the district around Bethlehem. Like the gospel writers centuries later, Micah stressed God’s ability to do big things in people and settings that seemed insignificant. When have you seen God do something big through something “little”?
- Micah said the coming ruler would “shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD...And they will live securely.” Early Christians, even when the Roman Empire imprisoned or killed them, still saw Jesus in this prophecy. How were they “living securely

Thursday, December 27 – Read Luke 2:1-7 – Caesar Augustus’ purpose was to collect more taxes for his far-flung empire. God “bent” Caesar’s decree to divine purposes, using it to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, a hard trip for pregnant Mary. There the baby Jesus was born, as Micah prophesied

- The Christmas story shows God’s Great Reversal. Augustus, a human who thought he was a God, forced Mary and Joseph to make a hard trip with just a decree. Jesus, God become human, spent his first night on earth in an animal shelter. Where do you see God’s power in the Christmas story? How does that redefine “power” for us?
- “That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus...He sought an entry to the over-crowded hearts of men; he could not find it....His search—and his rejection— go on.” (William Barclay) Does your heart have room for Jesus?

Friday, December 28 – Read Luke 2:8-20 – We’re used to the shepherds in manger scenes, Christmas pageants and paintings. Yet when Jesus was born, no one looked for shepherds. They were obscure (like Mary). Most priests shunned them because, caring for flocks, they couldn’t keep the rituals “holiness” required. But God loved them. When Jesus grew up, he said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11).

- The angel gave the child born in Bethlehem three titles. A “Savior” rescued people from danger. “Messiah” (a Hebrew term) meant “anointed ruler.” “Lord” was a word Greek-speaking Hebrews used to refer to God. How did each of these words capture some of the many facets of who Jesus was and what he did for us?
- Jerusalem was only a few miles from Bethlehem. Was God biased against the people of power and influence at that time? Why didn’t the “herald angels” sing in the Temple courts, or at the high priest’s luxurious house in Jerusalem? How can you keep your heart and your home open to God’s presence this Christmas?

Saturday, December 29 – Family Activity: Read Luke 2:1-7. Use a computer to find out how many miles Mary and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Imagine their journey. What do you think they took with them? What do you think they talked about? How many days did it take them? How do you think they each felt? Talk as a family about what a trip would be like if you traveled that far now. What would you take with you? How long would it take you? What would you discuss along the way? Compare and contrast their journey with yours. Thank God for Mary and Joseph who were faithful to God in taking the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.