

Shiloh United Methodist Church
Traveling to Bethlehem

Luke 2:1-5

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Luke 2:1-5 Common English Bible (CEB)

2 In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. ² This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. ³ Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. ⁴ Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. ⁵ He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant.

This last month we have been studying closely the character of Joseph. It has been fascinating to study alongside you all to learn about and consider who he is and even imagine the quality of his character. As we discussed his character during our final class we all seemed resolved that Joseph was a good man and made wise decisions to support the raising of Jesus with Mary. As I reflected on this over the remainder of the week something in the scripture struck me, while we know that Joseph was a "righteous man" from scripture, that he had no desire to be mean to Mary and therefore was not going to shame her for getting pregnant before the marriage, and that he shifted this decision after hearing from God. We know very little else about Joseph, except for the characteristics we can assign through who Jesus became and what we hope Joseph was.

I say that because any other attributes of Joseph have to fill in the gaps about.

Yesterday, I was out walking and I found this hat laying on the ground outside of an office building. It is a cheaply made Santa hat, yet I found myself recognizing that my mind wanted to fill in the blanks of the hat got there. My childhood mind wanted to imagine that Santa dropped it in a pre-flight test of his new sleigh, my mind of correctness thought it must be a littering person who left it, my hopeful mind wondered what saint offering Christmas cheer left it lying here on accident, and my curious mind wished I could help the hat complete its story and get this hat back home.

Two things seem to arise if you study the story of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. 1. It is not clear why Mary had to journey with Joseph, but she did and because of this Jesus was born in Bethlehem. 2. They had a choice of which road to take on their journey.

If you have ever spent time with a couple preparing for the birth of a child, most of them plan out as much as they can. They pick out which hospital to go to, they consider which doctor to deliver with, and they plan out as best they can the hoped for pregnancy and delivery. Mary and Joseph probably had worked out the place for the birth, considered which midwives in Mary's family (Mary being from Nazareth, and had made plans for the birth as best they could. Then came this decree for a census to be taken, and from historical study the consequences for not responding the census would have been severe.

Did Joseph have to take Mary? From the legal realities of the day it appears he would not have needed to take Mary. Why did Mary go with Joseph then? My classes on Tuesday conjectured it was because of Joseph's good character to protect Mary, others wondered if there was a cultural reason, and we wondered together if they knew the prophet Micah that says,

Micah 5:2 Common English Bible (CEB)

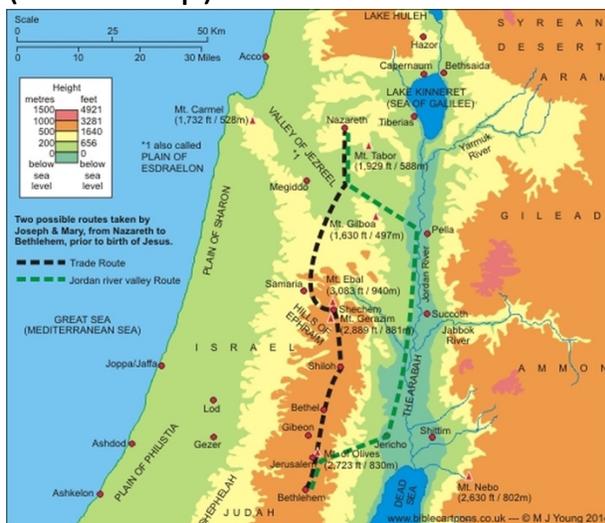
² As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah,

though you are the least significant of Judah's forces,
one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you.
His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.

You see friends we try to fill in the story we love to know what might have happened and why. We do not actually know why Mary went, but she did.

The other pondering was which road did they take.

(Show Map)



If you study maps from the day you will notice there are two major routes they could take. It is about 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Which if you walk straight through on level ground takes 3-4 days and this is what many commentators used to say it took. However, if you consider that Mary was pregnant, very pregnant, and if you actually were to look at the terrain like one BBC correspondent did several years ago by renting a donkey and walking from one town to the next it can take about 9 days.

Looking at this map Nazareth is in the north and Bethlehem is to the south. There were two road they could take. One was a western route(left of map) they could have taken through the area of Samaria, an untrusted area in this day with Samaritans and Jews not getting along. The other route was a faster, more level route along the Jordan river. As we conjectured in Bible study about which route they took, I shared I like the idea of Joseph knowing Samaritans and crossing barriers because Jesus would have learned crossing cultural barriers from Joseph as well as God. However, Joseph could have gone with the flow of traffic along the Jordan where Jesus would later be baptized too.

We just don't know all the details about Joseph and Mary, and how the journey to Bethlehem happened. Yet, for us there is some deeper truth in this story that draws us back and that calls us to want to fill in the gaps and imagine how God worked through this story.

There is another story that goes this way:

The jacket that came home

One day there was a knock at the monastery door. The monk who responded found a derelict-looking mendicant on the doorstep, wearing just a thin shirt and a pair of ragged trousers on this bitterly cold day.

"Good day to you, Father," said the beggar. "I wonder, would you have a warm jacket to spare at all? I've no home and it's awfully cold right now, living on the streets."

The monk immediately took pity on the poor shivering man.

"Just wait a moment," he said, and went to his room, where his own one and only jacket was hanging on the door hook.

Minutes later he was back at the door and he gave the homeless man his jacket, with no thought as to how he

himself would keep warm when he had to go outside. "He needs it more than I do," he thought to himself.

A few weeks later the monks were sitting together over supper one night and the subject of homeless people came up. "There was one round here only yesterday," said one of the monks. "I gave him my jacket."

Then another monk remembered, "The same thing happened to me only last week." One after the other the monks recalled how a homeless man had come to the door begging for a jacket, and one after another of them had given away their own jacket. There seemed to be a veritable epidemic of men in need of jackets this winter.

It was nearly Christmas. The first monk was down in the town, in the market square, when he was surprised to see the homeless man who had begged him for a jacket. There he was running a nice little business in the market, selling the monks' jackets. But he said nothing and passed by with a wry smile on his face.

Others were happy too. There were many in the town who had no warm clothes. One old man, for example, was overjoyed to be able to buy a good jacket so cheaply. He paid for it and put it on straight away and then made his way back home. But he didn't get far before he was stopped in his tracks by the sight of a man lying at the edge of the road, where he had been taken ill and collapsed. He couldn't have known that the casualty had been on his way home to the monastery. He couldn't have known that the bystanders had already called an ambulance. All he knew was that here was a man shivering in the road, sick, cold and helpless. Without hesitation he took off the jacket he had just bought, and laid it gently around the man. "He needs it more than I do," he thought to himself.

And so it was that the jacket that had been given away so freely all those weeks ago found its way home to its original owner, carried on a tide of deception and generosity, of need and of compassion.¹

Like the jacket God allows his love, God's very self to be en-fleshed in the incomplete story of humanity. That amidst the deception, our mistrust, our fear, that compassion might be carried to all creation. The story is only incomplete for us, the journey seems unclear to us, but for God and for us, when we trust in God we know the story is complete. That God is with us, and we are with God.

May you find God in your story this season, Amen.

Children's message

Star wars joke...

Is BB Hungry? No, BB-8

What is Darth Vader's favorite kind of chocolate? Dark Chocolate

What is Luke Skywalker's favorite temperature? Luke Warm

Characters in the story...who do you think you would be?

People of story

¹ Silf, Margaret. One Hundred More Wisdom Stories (pp. 104-105). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.

