

LEAVING HOME FOR YOU AND ME

Luke 2: 1-20 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Lots of folks are on the road at Christmas time, or they will soon be on the road to go home for Christmas. The reason for all the travel back when Jesus was born, was not a sentimental journey or an “I’ll be home for Christmas” idea. As far as the crowds on the roads of Galilee, Judea, Perea, Samaria, and Decapolis, it appeared to be all about a money crisis—a money crunch. Emperor Augustus Caesar and his Roman government were nearly out of money. That’s not too remarkable, as we all know, the government has always seemed to be in need of more money. The obvious answer in the past for a money-raising stimulus package has usually been a plan to raise more taxes. In the days of all the Caesars, no one thought of just printing more money. Back then, that would have been impossible. Augustus Caesar decided the best method to raise money was to raise taxes, and the best way to raise taxes was to take a census. From a census of the entire known inhabited world, Caesar Augustus received a list of innumerable names from every country under Rome’s control, from which he would collect taxes. With the money raised, Augustus Caesar began to build the mighty Roman empire. It has been written that when Augustus Caesar came to power, Rome was a city of mud bricks. He reigned as emperor for 58 years. He was known as the greatest Caesar of them all, greater than Julius Caesar, his grand uncle who adopted him. Augustus means, ‘the exalted one.’ Augustus Caesar ended his reign as emperor, leaving Rome a city of marble.

Today, as we look at this familiar Christmas text, let’s examine the leaving home journeys that God ordained. God had a divine plan when Jesus was born. I see in our text three major reasons why people were journeying on that first Christmas. As we look at them, it is our call to awe and wonder at the extent God went on the night Jesus was born. In the text before us, are three trips God ordained. Each of these trips took differing times for the journey and the arrival. Each trip had a divine purpose far beyond human reason. Let’s examine these three trips God ordained and what each of these three trips were designed to do. By examining these three trips, perhaps God will give us all new meaning to our journeys as many of us may be on the road ourselves in this week ahead.

JOURNEY # 1 WAS JOSEPH AND MARY’S FIVE-DAY JOURNEY FROM NAZARETH TO BETHLEHEM. (I.) Luke 2: 1-5 tells this story. Mary was now

nearly 9 months along in carrying the Christ-Child. Nazareth was not where Micah predicted Messiah, the Christ, would be born. To what extent would God go to fulfill every jot and tittle of His Word? What would God do to get Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, ordaining at least a five-day journey across desolate country? Micah the prophet in Micah 5: 2 said, “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” Messiah Jesus was ordained to be born in the city of David, one of the least cities in all of Judea—in Bethlehem. The timing had to be perfect. In the fullness of time, (Galatians 4: 4) when God was about to send forth His Son, born of a woman, God engraved it on the mind of Augustus Caesar to make a

decree in Rome for a census to be taken of all the inhabited earth. Remember that lowly Nazareth was 1500 miles by ship from Rome, and over 3000 miles by land. So, God led Caesar, in this first census while Cyrenius or Quirinius was governor of Syria, to make a mighty decree for all peoples in the inhabited world to return to their birthplace. Everyone must leave home where they were living, to go home to their birthplace. Notice v. 3. ‘And all went to be registered, each to his own town.’”

It sounds like a novel idea for the whole world to be on the road in the month Jesus was born. It may have started out as a romantic idea to get on the road walking across the country. Perhaps Joseph might have welcomed the idea of getting out of Nazareth for the birth of Jesus. There’s a good chance Joseph got no small amount of torment about marrying a woman who claimed to be a virgin, despite the fact that she was pregnant. Sometimes, it may seem good to leave home for a few days to get away from hard pills to swallow, to get away from gossiping people, and to get away from judgmental folks ready to badger and persecute whoever they believe to be outside their acceptance levels, outside their prescribed expectations. But even two days on the road with a pregnant wife, now must have seemed like an endless trip. We all know how children clamor on a 2,000-mile trip, after 15 miles, saying, “Are we there yet?” I suspect Joseph and Mary were soon exhausted. The road they traveled would have been clogged with people crisscrossing across Palestine. All the people traveling meant new risks and it would have taken longer.

The way to Jerusalem from Nazareth was 55 miles away, the way the crow flies, but to travel, it was over a hundred miles through some of the most desolate country. Mary was, as the scripture says, great with child. There was no exceedingly comfortable way to make this journey. There is a good chance Mary may have ridden on a donkey for much of the trip, but there is no record of how Joseph and Mary made the journey. Walking wasn’t easy, standing long wasn’t comfortable, and sitting on a donkey for miles wouldn’t have been easy. In her ninth month, Mary was on the road. Most historians suggest Joseph took the Jordan river road which was close to water for the travelers. It was a long journey and most of the travelers would not have gone through Samaria. That meant that Joseph walked east to the Jordan River and then followed the valley floor of the Jordan south to Jericho, then west 22 miles up, up, up through the mountains to Jerusalem and then a quick six or so miles south to Bethlehem. The road up to Jerusalem would have been extremely difficult, dangerous because of bandits, and distressing for Mary who was so far along. Some travelers were going further than Joseph and Mary from as far north as Caesarea Philippi and Damascus to as far south as Hebron or Beersheba down by Gaza. Yet, none of the other travelers were being moved from one city to another to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5: 2. So, # 1, remember, that when God wanted Mary to get in her divinely chosen place to fulfill His Word about Jesus’ birth, it was more than wonderful that He ordained a five-day journey over desolate country. There’s a 2nd trip God ordained:

JOURNEY # 2 WAS THE SHEPHERD’S S ONE HOUR JOURNEY TO WELCOME THE BIRTH OF JESUS, GOD’S NEWBORN SON. (II.) Notice Luke 2:8-20. It was lambing time when God decided to send His Spotless Lamb.

When God sent His spotless lamb, He got the word out to the special people He thought would know the most about spotless lambs, more than all others. The Jewish Mishnah helps us understand who these shepherds would have been. They were not ordinary shepherds who stayed out in the barren wilderness far beyond Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The Mishnah tells us that the Jews expressly forbade the keeping of flocks of sheep near the towns. They must watch their flocks out in the wilderness. But there was one exception. Temple shepherds were allowed to keep their sheep year-round on the Judean hills in the six mile stretch between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. These Bethlehem shepherds, temple shepherds had but one purpose for their flocks. They were raising spotless lambs for the sacrifices in Jerusalem. These shepherds guarded their flocks year-round including this incredible night when Jesus was born. On this night of Jesus' birth, these temple shepherds were watching their flocks. They knew the lambs they tended were destined for sacrifice.

That night of all nights, earth and heaven must have seemed to mingle together as suddenly, an angel of the Lord stood in mid-heaven before these temple shepherds whose eyes were filled with fear. The angel calmed their fears and announced to them the birth of the Lamb of God, the Savior, Christ (Messiah) the Lord. The glory of the Lord now enfolded and enveloped these temple shepherds with a divine blanket and mantle of light. Surprise, awe, fear, and even terror now was hushed as they heard the angel speaking. This was no angel of death, but an angel of life, now joined by God's angelic choir, the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among those with whom He is pleased." The angel told the shepherds, "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." It was God's way of telling them, "Go straight to Bethlehem and find the Baby Jesus

When did the angel's announcement occur? We aren't told. But I wonder, "Did the announcement come at the moment Jesus breathed His first breath on earth as Jesus was born? Was the angel sent to announce the birth of Jesus waiting for God the Father to say, "Now!"? Were the attendant angels without number, waiting in the wings—waiting for the divine signal—saying, "Jesus is born!"? The Jews had a tradition that when the sacrificial lamb was laid on the altar, temple music would burst forth from three sections. One section would proclaim the kingdom of God, one would proclaim the providence of God, and the other would proclaim the final judgment of God. Then there would be three blasts on the priest's trumpets. When this announcing angel gave the good news in verses 10, 11, and the announcing angel gave the sign of what the shepherds should look for—baby Jesus lying in a manger, the heavenly choir was on. Only the temple shepherds got to hear that first Christmas cantata saying and singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men."

As quickly as the announcement and the cantata were over, in the dead of night, with the stars again shining and the moon shining, the shepherds must have been talking up a storm. What had they just seen in the heavens? What lengths God went to, to announce the birth of His newborn Son! The angel had given them a job

to do that very night—to leave their flocks, their ewes, and newborn lambs during lambing, to go see the spotless Lamb of God. These stunned, excited shepherds did an unheard-of thing. They left their ewes and lambs to the sovereignty of the same God who announced the birth of His only begotten Son. They went straight to Bethlehem, perhaps no more than an hour away. They came in haste, v. 16. God wanted this chosen welcome party to come and go before the roosters crowed announcing morning light. Bethlehem was not that large. The angel said the Babe was lying in a manger. These Bethlehem shepherds must have known the little town of Bethlehem well. Verse 16 tells us that they found their way to Mary and Joseph and the baby, as He was lying in a manger. As quickly as they came, they hurried back to their sheep, but now, morning light had dawned, and these shepherds were glorifying and praising God, and telling their story, v. 20

Beloved, when God wanted to have a birthday welcome for His newborn Son, it was more than wonderful that He ordained a short walking one-hour trip in the dead of night for these temple shepherds to welcome the Savior. For the angel had said, “There has been **born for you** a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.” The phrase the angel said, “born for you” must have stuck with them. They knew all about the sacrifices. They knew Messiah was coming. They knew more than their souls and spirits could contain. The Gospel evangel of Jesus’ birth was out. The good news was heralded in those Bethlehem hills leading up to Jerusalem. The 1st evangelists were common shepherds. Thirdly, and lastly, there is one other journey in our text, and this journey is the greatest journey of all time, the trip of God the Son leaving Home to come live in our home on earth. What is this 3rd, final trip of God?

JOURNEY # 3 WAS GOD THE SON’S NINE MONTH LONG JOURNEY FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH TO COME TO SAVE US FROM OUR SIN.

(III.) Notice Luke 2: 6,7. This census was not a one day or one night event. For Joseph, it must have been a strange feeling to be back home in Bethlehem after being gone so long. It was his old home, but doubtless, it wasn’t the same. Many of the people Joseph had known must have been gone. It’s very likely Joseph didn’t know who was left living in his own hometown. Perhaps it had been years since Joseph and his family moved away from Bethlehem to Nazareth. It must have been his first thought as Joseph came into Bethlehem, to look for a place to stay in the Bethlehem Inn until the census, registration, and taxes were over. Such an inn may well have been a two-story building with guests on the second floor and supplies, servants, and animals, on the ground floor. Rarely would this inn have been full, but obviously Joseph wasn’t the only traveler coming back to his birthplace in Bethlehem. Luke tells us the Inn was full and there was no place there.

We aren’t told that Mary bore Jesus the moment she arrived in Bethlehem. No, Luke 2:6 tells us, “And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Was it only 24-48 hours or more days before Jesus would come? We don’t know. What we do know, is that Joseph and Mary found a place to stay? Was it in a barn, a shed, a cave, or was it in a side room of a home where people kept animals? All we know is that it appeared to be a stable of some size, large enough for Joseph and Mary to share the room with the animals, where they would lay baby Jesus in a

manger, a food trough where Jesus was laid down in the straw or hay. Did Joseph find a mid-wife or a lady he knew to join him in helping Mary when Jesus was born? We don't know. We do know that there appear to have been no birth complications, for we read, "the time came for Mary to give birth, and she gave birth to her first-born son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the Inn." (v.6-7)

But looking at Joseph and Mary's journey, their lodging place, and the birthing room for Jesus, is not the focus God has placed on my heart. The focus I want us to look at for a few moments is the nine-month journey of Jesus from heaven to earth. The journey began the moment that Mary said to the angel Gabriel in Luke 1: 38, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Now in a stable, barn, shed, cave, or shed adjoined to a home, nine months of waiting for Mary now was over. The days were completed, for Mary to give birth. The place didn't have the smell of a hospital nursery. It smelled of animal manure and animals, perhaps cows, sheep, a horse, a donkey, chickens, and farm animals. There was no bed or bedding like we would expect in a birthing-room.

What did Mary and Joseph have. There would be straw or hay and a manger here that they could use to place their new-born little baby boy. Mary's labor must have progressed as her contractions began to come closer, faster, and longer. This betrothed stepfather Joseph, was suddenly pressed into service, whether by himself, as I picture it, or encouraging Mary, as a midwife or a woman or two that came to help and assist her. Joseph must have been scared, nervous, and excited. Mary may have learned some important things when she was with Elizabeth and baby John, the Baptist was born. Joseph may have been amazed that Mary seemed to know what to do. He could hold her hand, wipe her forehead and wait. Then the moment arrived as the time to push came. With one final push she must have cried out, straining with all her might. Then there was a sound, a tiny sound of God's Son, Jesus, gasping air in our home, earth. Then more lusty cries must have come as Mary put Jesus to her breast and He found His place to rest and begin His life nursing. It was just as the angel had said, "A boy, a baby boy." Joseph had to remember the dream and the words of the angel quoting Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: "Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son; and she will call His name Immanuel, meaning "God with us." The angel also told Joseph, Matthew 1:21, "And she will bear a Son and you (that's Joseph) shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins."

The longest journey in history was made in Jesus' first coming. Christmas was God's journey into our sinful, suffering, shameful world. He made this first journey into this humble village of Bethlehem, and Jesus came to grow up like we grow up, and then to begin His public ministry, looking for sinners like you and me. It happened 2000 + years ago. Jesus came, John 1:11-12, to His own, and His own received Him not. But to as many as receive Him, to those He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His Name. Will you open your heart and your life and your home to Jesus? Will you receive Him into your heart this Christmas? Jesus left Home in heaven's Glory for you. Will you leave

your home in sin and open your heart to Jesus to come inside you and live in your life as His new home? That happened to me as a little boy in 1948. Has it happened yet in your life? When God wanted to save lost sinners, it was more than wonderful that He ordained a nine-month long journey from heaven to earth to flesh out Himself as a baby boy, the God-man, God's Son, Jesus. Will you come to Jesus today with your praise and your adoration? Will you surrender your life to Him? Bow your heads with me. Jesus is calling for you. He is calling your name. Will you come to Jesus?