

Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-20
December 24, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Thomas Long describes the trip Joseph and Mary undertook that first Christmas in this way:

It is roughly 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. According to Google Maps, it would take 34 hours to travel if on foot, not counting stops for rest. And of course, Google does not factor in contingencies such as marauding bandits, deep rain-washed wadis cutting through the path, inns with no room, or full-term pregnancies. But this long, wearying, unpredictable journey is, according to Luke, precisely what Joseph and Mary undertake.¹

In all reality, 34 hours more likely might have been in the ballpark of 240 hours (10 days). A lengthy journey as Joseph and Mary would have skirted around a direct line to an out of the way one with easier terrain and free from entering the land occupied by Israel's long-standing rival the Samaritans.

We, too, have been on a "long, wearying and unpredictable" journey this past year. Everything is just a bit different this Christmas. Gathered in our homes for worship. Perhaps, like Thanksgiving, another holiday celebration void of a large family gathering in our efforts to bring this journey safely to a halt. Perhaps, even pondering, "Is it even worth celebrating Christmas this year?"

In a weekly discussion on the upcoming gospel passage, Bethany member Jon Twing recollected a story from when he was a youth. A neighbor was experiencing a journey of his own as his son was thousands of miles away fighting a war in Vietnam. Jon wondered to himself if this loving father could experience any sense of happiness amidst so much uncertainty. Could the good news of great joy still matter? Could this man still celebrate Christmas? So, one day, he posed the

question to his neighbor and the response is one he recalls all these years later, “How can we not (celebrate Christmas)?” Things were very much different in the life of that family, yet it was the story of Christmas that is told every year that very much continued to shine light and provide hope.

Just as no census by the empire, no room for a crib, no arduous journey could prevent the birth of Christ and the dawn of a new day God was ushering in ... no global pandemic can put a halt to our celebration and proclamation of this story that changed everything. Heidi Haverkamp reminds us, it is the story that opens “a new door on the journey toward salvation...as God came to earth, to live and die as one of us.”ⁱⁱ

The shepherds were in their field watching over their flocks by night when this story was revealed to them by an angel of the Lord and they were led on their own journey to see the Christ child born unto the world. Whatever metaphorical field we find ourselves in tonight such as the field of isolation or loneliness. The field of fear or despair. The field of grief or loss. The story of Christmas is the promise that we are never alone in those fields. It is the story of how much God loves you, loves us, loves the world. It is the story that accompanies us on our journey. It is the story of joy bundled in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. It is the story of Jesus Christ. Emmanuel. God with us!

The angel, via way of the Holy Spirit, comes to us and continues to speak this story into life saying, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” And it is this good news, this joyous message, this permanent promise in the temporary journeys we find ourselves on, in all those fields we inhabit, in our homes worshipping online that pulls us together and joins us with the multitude of the heavenly host to praise God and say, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors.” (Say it with me again)

The birth of Jesus did not instantaneously set all things right. The Roman Empire continued to rule oppressively. The shepherds returned to their fields and were still viewed as scoundrels and lowlifes. Joseph and Mary would soon have to flee

to Egypt with the Christ child to save his life from a worldly king intent on clinging to power at all costs. In many ways, things may have seemed to stay the same. Yet, they were vastly different.

That baby born in a manger was and is God's pronouncement to the world, to all who at times feel as lowly as those humble shepherds, to all who find themselves alone with no place to lay their weary head, to all who may feel God is absent. Whatever journey you are on right now. Wherever you are. Whatever feelings you may be experiencing. Jesus is God's pronouncement that you matter! You are precious and beloved! You are favored! This child is your sign. He is our sign. He is the world's sign that God is never done with the world God so dearly loves. As St. Athanasius writes, "The Word [of the Father], so great and so high, has been made manifest ... in a human body for this reason only, out of the love and goodness of God [His Father], for the salvation of humanity [us men]."ⁱⁱⁱ

We know our present journey will continue for days, weeks, and perhaps many more months. Yet, we celebrate tonight, tomorrow and amidst our journey because we know our pathways are never traversed alone. We know no matter what obstacle we encounter or dark day we may face – the Light of the world will always be by our side. Always shining through the darkness leading us to brighter days and fields abundant with His grace, love, strength, hope, and a joyous jubilee that sounds out, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!" How can we not celebrate? For the angel says, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day [in the city of David] a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Merry Christmas dear people of God! Praise, and thanks be to God! Amen.

ⁱ Thomas J. Long; "Nativity, December 24 and 25, 2014: Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)"; <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/nativity-december-24-and-25-2014-luke-21-14-15-20>

ⁱⁱ Heidi Haverkamp; "Endless Advent"; Sunday's Coming Premium, Christian Century.

ⁱⁱⁱ *On the Incarnation*; St. Athanasius; St. Vladimir's Seminary Press; Crestwood, New York; p.26.