

Journey to Bethlehem 4: *At Great Risk*

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Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord

commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Isaiah 7:10-16

¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

We know the story so well; but let's begin today by remembering how the Holy Family has come thus far. Under our Advent theme of journey, I think the full memory of the Biblical account of this unexpected birth merits recollection. So before we get to Matthew's distinctive proclamation, let's recall some of what Luke says about this thing that has come to pass. Because in the winter beauty of this sanctuary we might conjure up notions of a Christmas card kind of excursion to Bethlehem, rather than the treacherous ordeal it must have been.

The Roman government declares a census, forcing the couple to travel and register in a town far from home; the woman is heavily pregnant. James Strange, a biblical archaeologist, says, "We have no idea how difficult it was." He writes that Matthew and Luke use such few words to describe the journey that they assumed their readers would know exactly how risky it was. The trip from Nazareth is ninety miles to the little town of Joseph's ancestors, Bethlehem. First, along the flatlands of the Jordan River, then west over the hills surrounding Jerusalem; it was a grueling trip, says Professor Strange. "In antiquity, the most we find people traveling is twenty miles a day, and this trip was very much uphill and down; it was not simple..." Because of Mary's impending delivery, they would likely have traveled only ten miles a day. One of the most terrifying dangers in ancient Palestine was the densely forested valley of the Jordan River where bear and wild boar lived in the woods. Archaeologists have unearthed documents warning travelers of these dangers in the forest. Bandits and robbers were also common hazards along the major trade routes like the one Joseph and Mary would have traveled, so they likely made their trip in a caravan for their own protection. ¹

1) "A Long, Cold Road to Bethlehem: nativity gospel accounts of Mary and Joseph's journey gloss over the arduous reality of life and travel in ancient Galilee, scholars say," found in archives, L.A. Times 12/23/95.

And we know the hardship did not end when Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem. When they reach their destination there is no place to stay, and Mary gives birth in a stable, likely a cave adjacent to a home where animals are kept. Biblical scholars differ on whether the Nativity stories in the gospels of Matthew and Luke are historical accounts or symbolic narratives of the beginnings of Christianity. But one thing is certain: the world of Mary and Joseph was dangerous, and the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem would have been extraordinarily difficult.

One biblical commentary contrasts their reality to ours rather bluntly: “Compared to this, two hours languishing in the DMV waiting room hardly seems worth grumbling over... Mary and Joseph are “like poor and defenseless people everywhere and in every time, at the whim of whatever Caesar or mindless bureaucracy or uncaring machinery of state happens to lash out in their direction. Caesar issues a decree, drinks another glass of wine, eats a cluster of grapes, and Joseph and Mary pack provisions and head out on the road to Judea. They are faceless nobodies under the boot of an uncaring empire. Their only hope – if they have any hope at all – is not in Caesar Augustus, but in the God of ancient Israel, who accompanies them even when they walk through the shadow of death.”²

That is where their journey intersects with our journey. Their real-life plight may be more akin to that of a poor family from Guatemala desperately trying to escape poverty and violence by walking to Texas, or a Ukrainian couple panicked there might not be lights in the delivery room when the baby comes. however, by the grace of God, and the way the gospel is told, the road to Bethlehem is meant to lead us all to the surprising hope that awaits us there. In due time we will get to Luke’s more poetic telling on Christmas Eve and bask in the wonder of singing angels filling the night sky over a field of startled shepherds. But before we get to pondering God’s full glory shining down on the manger, and the face within it radiating God’s Incarnate love, today we can imagine

2) Tom Long and Donyelle McCray, *A Surprising God*, p.91.

that risky ninety-mile trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem a metaphor for our journey. When life is hard, the journey of faith can be tough, and following in God's pathways is always risky business.

That's where Matthew's particular emphasis on Joseph enters in. Joseph is in an awkward, scary, and very human predicament. New Testament scholar, Beverly Gaventa, has observed that all around Matthew's telling, the birth narrative of Jesus is filled with fear. Last Sunday, we heard fear explicitly mentioned when the Magi tell Herod they have come looking for the newborn King. You remember – the gospel says Herod was frightened, and all of Jerusalem with him, because when Herod feels threatened, people die. But fear enters the story before the Magi show up in Herod's palace and before Jesus is born, because fear shows up first in Joseph. He is afraid of Mary's unexpected pregnancy; that's why he initially plans to free her from the obligation of their engagement. He could have brought charges against her and exposed her to public disgrace, even death, but Joseph will not do that. Instead, he decides to dismiss her quietly; until we are told, an angel appears in a dream and says, "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Then Joseph waits and attends to Mary.³

Perhaps Joseph is the one in the story who is most like us, because he is the one who seems to be presented - day after day – with circumstances beyond his control, as many of us often are. Professor of Family Therapy, Pauline Boss, has argued that it will take a long time for the world to grapple with all of the fear and losses we have suffered during the past few years. Like Joseph, we lost our independence and freedom to move about as we pleased; we lost trust in the world as a safe and predictable place, and many have been overwhelmed with fear. The pandemic uncovered things like the layers of racism and inequities that continue to plague our society. Even now the global insecurity continues

3) Grateful to Kim Clayton for citing Gaventa in "The Implications of Christmas for Joseph," Brick Presbyterian Church, 2019.

as Covid rates rise again and are compounded by a bad flu season and RSV. Then, there are the individual journeys that take some of us through inner terrain that is densely forested with threats and fear: the trauma in the family that ebbs and flows but never fully goes away; the unexpected phone call with sad news that rattles our sense of normalcy; the frightening diagnosis that we never imagined would come our way. People who study these things say the sense of isolation, depression and anxiety are at an all-time high.⁴

Thank God we have a partner in faith when we are presented with these circumstances beyond our control. We can stand side by side with Joseph because he is the one who shows us how to journey forward. In his season of fear and uncertainty he does an extraordinary thing. We are told he was righteous, which means he read the scriptures and lived his life through a “certain kind of lens, the lens of the character and nature of God who is loving and kind.” He listened to God’s angel messenger, and instead of abandoning Mary, he protects her, he loves her, and he commits to raising a baby into an adult who is also good and kind, who is the revelation of God’s love and grace. At great risk, Joseph shows us how to journey in God’s way of love.

A recent story about a Russian Orthodox priest shows us something of Joseph’s risky, faithful way. Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, Father Johann Burdin, who served a small Orthodox church in central Russia, preached a sermon about it. He posted a note on his church website, and then preached against the invasion saying it was wrong that Russian soldiers were killing their brothers and sisters in Christ. “We cannot stand on the sidelines while brother kills brother,” he said. “Blood is on the hands not just of the soldiers but those who approve of this war and those who remain silent.” A few hours after that sermon Father Johann was called to the police station for following his

4) Pauline Boss, *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change*.

moral compass. “I didn’t try to persuade political views,” he told the police, “I was aiming at this light that is inside of people. Even the worst people carry this light.” A few days later, he stood trial for violating the censorship law, and a few parishioners were called to testify. Clearly trying to protect their beloved pastor, one said she was deaf, and couldn’t hear any of the sermon. Two others said they were praying and didn’t listen to it. Nevertheless, Father Johann was found guilty and fined about a month’s worth of wages. Community pressure then forced his resignation from the church, and if he doesn’t find a new one soon, he’ll lose his ordination. Ironically, his original audience for that sermon was about ten parishioners, but his story got picked up in the news and now has been read by millions.

This is what Father Johann says about that risky sermon: “All people have such moments in their life when God offers them a chance to make a choice. This is the question God asks: Who are you? This war is a test for all humanity. If you keep silent, that’s your answer to God. You have to answer this question – Who are you? - with acts and words. You show who you really are.”⁵

At the end of a long and risky journey, Joseph was given a choice. He saw a light within Mary that is inside of everyone. He answered the choice God gave him with his acts and with his words. He didn’t disgrace Mary; he acted to protect her and to help her. And with his words, he named the baby. Trusting the ancient promises of scripture that a virgin would conceive and bear a son, Emmanuel, a sign that God is with us in all things, Joseph names the baby Jesus – which means, of course, God Saves. At the end of the journey, the baby born at great risk amid all of our fear and uncertainty is called God Saves.

AMEN.

5) Putin vs. the Priest, New York Times, 12/7/22.