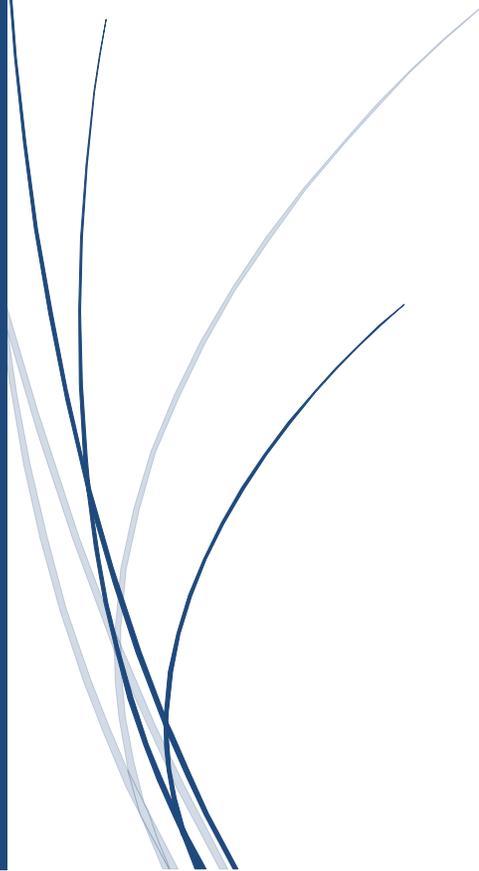




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“Unexpected Journeys”

Luke 2:1-7



Brad Walston

CARBONDALE COMMUNITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

But I don't want go to Bethlehem! I'm fat, I don't feel well, and I don't want to spend 10 days on the road – on a donkey! I really feel for poor Mary; she had no idea that this was only the first of several unwanted journeys that she would be taking with or even because of this child.

Shortly after Jesus was born King Herod would try to kill him so Mary and Joseph would have to flee, about 350 miles to Egypt -- as refugees. Maybe we should consider that the next time we talk about immigration issues, eh?

33 years later Mary would take one last journey with her son, this time along the *via Dolorosa* as she followed him through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha – the hill where she would witness the crucifixion of her oldest boy.

We all have had to take journeys we didn't want to go on – a lot of us are on one right now. These journeys aren't predestined by God, but by life's circumstances or the will of others. – life happens, right? Cancer, addiction, unemployment, -- These unwanted, seemingly “unnecessary” journeys leave us disappointed, broken, confused, and wondering “Where the heck is God?” - Or my personal favorite, “Why me?” – The answer to that by the way is “Why not you?” I imagine Mary felt some of these same emotions when Joseph came home that day and broke the news to his very pregnant wife, “Caesar called a census. We have to go to Bethlehem.”

So they headed for Bethlehem. The first Two days wouldn't have too terribly difficult – considering they were walking and probably wearing bad-fitting sandals. The gospels do not mention a donkey, but it's likely that Joseph would have procured some kind of pack animal.

They would be going downhill from Nazareth toward the plains of the Jezreel Valley, past Megiddo where the final battle of the apocalypse to supposed to be fought. The word ‘Armageddon’ means hill of Megiddo...

From the Jezreel Valley Mary and Joseph would begin a gradual ascent, past acres and acres of olive trees. When I went to visit the Holy Land a few years ago, my friend, Jen asked me to find “her” olive tree. You see when she was married one of her wedding gifts had been an olive tree, planted in her name, in the holy Land.

There were thousands of them. Some of the oldest ones are said to date back to Jesus time. Needless to say, I didn't find Jen's tree.

After a few more days the road would grow steeper, winding up into the mountains of central Israel. Have any of ever taken the donkey trip down to the floor of the Grand Canyon and back? It's on my list of things to do, but I never have. I think their journey must have been something like that – only longer. I took one donkey trip one time that took about 45 minutes, and that was quite enough for me thank you!

Three more days, higher and higher they traveled, from the green agricultural areas of Northern Israel to the stark and arid country to the south. Hamilton says that this is where it starts to get uncomfortable for Mary – really? – seven days on a donkey so far and it's only just starting to get uncomfortable? I daresay Mary was probably pretty miserable.

On day nine or ten, they would finally see the hills of Jerusalem spread out before them. The Holy City, with that amazing temple – the center of the Jewish faith. I couldn't help but feel the excitement of Jerusalem when I visited – even with the soldiers, and the wall, and the checkpoints -- the power of the Holy City is palpable – so much history. Like visiting Elvis' Graceland – only better! Mary and Joseph probably felt the same way.

A few more hours across the desert and our two intrepid travelers finally reach Bethlehem. Mary starts going into labor and Joseph, like a typical man didn't think to call ahead for reservations, and can't find a room in Bethlehem anywhere – even the Motel 6 is booked solid!

Actually, all Luke tells us is that “while they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.” We don't know if it was right away or if it was several days after they got there. But the 64 dollar question is: if Bethlehem is Joseph's home town, why does he and his fiancée have to stay in an inn in the first place?

“Inn” – the Greek word used here is *kataluma*. The only other place this word is used is when Jesus sends his disciples ahead to find a room they can use for their last supper together. It's the “Upper Room.” It's a guest room. In a typical home of that period, there would be a central room serving as kitchen and living area. Off from that room you would find the parent's sleeping quarters. Then there

would be a guest room where the children would sleep – unless there were guests of course. This room was the *kataluma* and would maybe hold around six bedrolls side by side.

If Joseph had multiple siblings with families who were also visiting Bethlehem to register for the census, it's easy to imagine how crowded the *kataluma* might be. There would also be a stable or barn behind or next to the main house, maybe even under it if they built into the caves – like a garage. This was to protect the animals from thieves and predators at night.

Now, the Hebrew Bible – our Old Testament – states that when a woman gives birth to a son she becomes unclean until the child is circumcised, 8 days after he's born. The discharge of water and blood causes the mother to be unclean. Leviticus also teaches that anyone who touches a woman who has a “flow of blood” will also become ritually unclean until evening. Anything she lies on becomes unclean. Anything that touches her becomes unclean. Anyone who touches anything she lies on becomes unclean. Are you beginning to see the picture here? Mary can't give birth in the guest room because everything and everyone in it would be rendered unclean. The garage must have been the only option. ON the upside, it would have been warm and it would have been private. Sort of.

I can only imagine Mary – barely a teenager –forcing back tears between contractions in her in-laws' barn. I think we can understand Mary thinking that this was not how it was supposed to be. “Where are you, God? Why me?”

In his book “The Journey,” on which we have loosely based December's sermon series, Adam Hamilton tells a story of another couple who had an unwanted, unexpected journey.

Ann was 5 months pregnant when she had a feeling that something wasn't quite right. Doctors performed an amniocentesis and diagnosed her baby with a genetic condition called “Chromosome 22 Ring.” Very few cases were known at the time, and doctors told Ann and her husband Jerry that their baby would probably be still born. When Ann asked the doctor about delivering early so they could perform a surgery that might save the child's life the doctors told her, “Ann, this will not be a life worth saving.”

in 1984 little Matthew was born – he lived even though he was born with several serious birth defects. They named him Matthew because it means “gift from the Lord.” I don’t have to tell you that this was a journey that Ann and Jerry hadn’t expected and never wanted to take. But this was the journey life had dealt them and they loved Matthew very much.

Ann & Jerry first visited Adam Hamilton’s church, Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, when Matthew was 8 years old. Because of that visit the church started up a special needs ministry for Matthew and other children like him – they called it Matthew’s Ministry. Later on, when he needed surgery, they started an annual blood drive.

Matthew lived to be twenty one years old. His life had shaped Ann and Jerry into two of the most remarkable people that Adam Hamilton says he had ever met. Thousands of lives have been changed – over 140 special needs children and adults are part of Matthew’s Ministry, and over 1500 pints of blood are collected annually. Hamilton’s church and the entire community of Leawood, KS, were changed because of this child whose life wasn’t worth saving.

This is typical of God -- God takes our tragedies, our disappointment, our suffering, and our pain, and squeezes something good out of it. These are the journey’s we never wanted to take.

My experience with bullying when I was a child created a sense of compassion and empathy that I would never have developed on my own. Not to mention my long journey, out of addiction, AND into it as well...

Take a few minutes today to stop and look back over your life. Find those times where you cried out – or wanted to anyway – “God, where are you?!?” Maybe you’re on one of those journeys right now.

“God, why me? What are you doing to me?”

Maybe a better question should be, “What are you doing with me?”

Mary said it herself, “Let it be done with me according to your word.”

If you're on one of these journeys, you can trust that God is going to walk with you and God is going to bring good from it. Eventually.

As the apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:28, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

In the midst of the hardships that were the major part of Mary and Joseph's journey – the dashed hopes and shattered dreams – God was working to redeem the world. Adam Hamilton puts it this way, “God forces every circumstance, including the oppression of the roman government, to serve His purpose.”

That's still true. God is still working to reconcile us – to redeem us -- and to bring us back to him. We all take unwanted, difficult journeys and God always walks with us and works through them for good. Eventually.

Some brilliant, armchair philosopher recently put it like this – and I love the simplicity of it – “It'll all be OK in the end. If it's not OK, it's not the end.”

Amen