

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2021

Lectionary Year C: Luke 2:1-20

Back in the Eighties, my parents traveled to California for one of Dad's conferences related to his work in the sugarbeet industry. I know for sure that it was my Mom's first trip to California (not sure about Dad). But Mom had a cousin up in the San Fernando Valley whom she wanted to visit, and so, in addition to the conference, my parents worked in a little time away to go visit Ruth and her husband Cliff.

This was back in the days when kids were left at home while the parents traveled, and, as you might surmise, of all the places in this country I've been, California still isn't one of them. Thus, I'm telling a story using secondhand information.

In a rented Toyota Tercel, my parents drove up from San Diego to the LA suburb of Granada Hills, and, at one point in their journey, they found themselves (completely intentionally, mind you) on the Ventura Freeway...at around 4:45 in the afternoon. Dad was driving, and, prior to this, the extent of his city driving was limited to the Twin Cities and maybe Chicago. My Mom can still tell you how impressive the sight was of this eight-lane stream of cars moving in perfect synchronicity. Dad remembered that a turn signal actually meant something -- you turned it on, and a spot would open up for you! (Indiana drivers, please make note of this...)

I can only imagine that being a driver in California holds you accountable to a social contract that demands decent driving skills, lest traffic on roads like the Ventura Freeway goes completely haywire. Things may have changed in the intervening thirty-seven years since Mom and Dad were there, however...

Keeping traffic moving on a crowded freeway is an art in itself, as well as a testament to how much more quickly and efficiently we can get from Point A to Point B than we could centuries ago. If the journey took considerably more time than the amount of time you spent at your destination, then why bother making the trip at all? Past civilizations have been noted, for the most part, for not venturing more than ten or fifteen miles from home...over the course of entire lifetimes!

The Gospel of Luke contains an account of a long, arduous, and inefficient journey from a place called Nazareth in Galilee to the town of Bethlehem. Bethlehem, interestingly, has lent its name to other cities (like Bethlehem, Pennsylvania) as well as to churches and religious schools. When I drive to Fort Wayne, I usually pass by Suburban Bethlehem Lutheran Church and School, and I'm always amused by how odd "Suburban Bethlehem" sounds. "Suburban Bethlehem" sounds like where Mary and Joseph should've stopped for lodging because, you know, all the hotels downtown would be full. There had to have been a Super 8 on the outskirts where they could've stayed instead...

Back to the journey, though. Estimates of the length of Mary and

Joseph's travels are around ninety miles, given the route that they would've had to take. And even with the assistance of a donkey, their speed would rarely have exceeded three miles per hour, so "long, arduous, and inefficient" seems like an apt description of their journey. I can only imagine that the ruling Roman government of the time wasn't particularly interested in making the census easy to participate in, making Mary and Joseph among thousands of people sacrificing a lot of time and energy to take part in a head count. Our text mentions that Joseph "was descended from the house and family of David" (Luke 2:4b), indicating some necessity to him and Mary being counted in "the city of David," but they couldn't possibly have been the only two people required to make such a long journey.

Without a Ventura Freeway to whisk them along, Mary and Joseph plodded southward over the course of several days, on dusty roads and over sometimes unforgiving terrain...only to find themselves without lodging once they arrived at their destination. I must admit that, for the longest time, I had assumed that some villainous innkeeper had denied Mary and Joseph a hotel room, and that, even in peak seasons, there has to be someplace where a person can stay. But, alas, I discovered that the hotel industry as we know it today didn't exist two thousand years ago, and that the "inn" mentioned in the Gospel of Luke was probably a private residence with a guest room, not an 80-unit Holiday Inn Express.

If anything, there's a lesson to be learned there about superimposing modern realities onto stories from ancient history. We need to

(as best as we can) picture ourselves back in time, and without the conveniences that we take for granted today. Speaking personally, two of the reasons why I enjoy a good road trip involve the speed with which I can travel and the comfortable lodging available for me at the end of the day. Would I want to replicate Mary and Joseph's journey -- mostly on foot -- from Nazareth to Bethlehem? I don't think so!

The repeated use of the term "city of David" is significant to this occasion, as well. Not only was the great King David once ruler over this region, Jesus himself also was of Davidic ancestry (through his father, at least), and therefore can be regarded as a legitimate Hebrew Messiah, although this is only acknowledged by Christians and Messianic Jews. Hear the words of the angel to the shepherds once again: "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" (Luke 2:10b-11). What makes Jesus unique among other historical figures is that, as this verse says, Jesus saves, Jesus is the anointed one, and Jesus is God (or God-incarnate). So, as we think about what it means to celebrate Christmas, we are immediately drawn to what Jesus came into the world to do. The Savior has come to rescue us from all that has held us captive. Gloria in excelsis Deo!

It's not always easy, though, to balance this with many of the other sentiments that spring to mind at Christmas. I know that, as a

kid, I participated in my share of Sunday School Christmas programs that veered into the realm of all things cutesy and theologically questionable. But I don't believe it's possible to eradicate such sentiments completely. What the birth of Christ forces us to do is put God coming to Earth into a flesh-and-blood reality (this is what "incarnation" means), and sometimes a big part of this flesh-and-blood reality is the sentiment we feel when we imagine the infant Jesus "wrapped in bands of cloth" and placed in a manger. This is what it means to be fully human, which is what God became for us in Jesus Christ.

And we offer our prayers and praises on this most holy night in thanksgiving for the One who is born unto us, with all the wonder, imagination, and (yes) sentiment that overwhelms us now. We, too, have journeyed to Bethlehem, albeit only in spirit, and we are waiting to be numbered among those whom the Savior saves. Remember how impressed Dad was by the drivers on the Ventura Freeway who so courteously let him in any time he signaled? Well, many centuries ago, humanity signaled to God that it needed a Savior, and so God sent Jesus, and Jesus let humanity into God's Kingdom.

Gloria in excelsis Deo!

Amen.