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Luke 2: 1-7, Isaiah 11:1-10

Dec. 5, 2010

Journey of Love

This Christmas, just like every Christmas, a lot of people will travel to see family and friends. Airports and freeways will be crowded. Many people will sleep on couches, air mattresses, and even the floor in other people's homes.

I decided a long time ago that I didn't want to travel at Christmastime, so I invited my family to come to my house. They have to travel, not me!

I don't really like to drive all over the place on holidays.

But if travelling was the only way to see my family on Christmas, that's what I would do. I would do something I don't really want to do because I love my family and I cannot imagine not being with them on Christmas!

I know a lot of you travel at Christmas, too. To LA or Oxnard or the bay area or wherever the people you love are. It's what we do, the sacrifice we make to be able to be with people we love so that we can celebrate Christmas together.

Love is a powerful motivator when it comes to getting us out the door and moving!

When we are travelling at Christmas, we can think of ourselves as reenacting our lesson from the Gospel according to Luke this morning. In it, we heard about Mary and Joseph travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of about 240 miles. About twice as far as from here to LA.

Not too terribly far by car, depending on how much you like to drive, but a long way on foot!

Speaking of travelling by foot, where's the donkey? We all picture Mary sitting on a donkey, being led by Joseph, but Luke doesn't say anything about a donkey!

And neither do the other Gospel writers.

Matthew doesn't say anything about Bethlehem at all, and Mark and John don't even have stories about Jesus' birth, so where does the donkey come from?

From a compassionate tradition, I guess, begun by someone who could not imagine a very pregnant Mary walking all that way. On the other hand, I can't imagine her riding a donkey for that long, either.

Anyway, word of the census comes out and everyone has to go to their home towns. Joseph takes Mary with him. It's not clear why. It doesn't make sense that women had to go, especially not pregnant women. Romans didn't place much importance on women and probably only counted men, taking their word for family members.

But here's a possibility. Mary and Joseph were engaged, but they weren't married yet. And she was very pregnant. Maybe he took her with him to keep her protected from the people of Nazareth who would maybe be not so nice to her if he weren't around. After all, these are the same people who would try to stone Jesus as he began his ministry, saying derogatory things about his parents. Maybe she wasn't safe without Joseph. Even if no one would attack her physically, they might make very rude remarks to her about the father of her child running off and leaving her.

There's another possibility---Maybe he didn't want to miss the baby's birth. He had no choice about going, so he brought her along. Another piece of this story might be that the birth was not expected so soon and that it was sped up by all those hours on that donkey----or by walking so far!

There are a lot of details that we can only imagine as we try to fill in the blanks. We only know what Luke tells us---that Mary and Joseph travelled a very long distance and that the birth of Jesus took place a long way from their home in Nazareth.

They made a long journey, and it seems to me that they made that journey for love. Joseph had to go for the census, and he took Mary because he loved her, or maybe it was her idea and she went with him, even in her condition! Because she loved him!

And so when we travel to the homes of loved ones, we are following in their footsteps, making a journey of love.

But we need to think about this a little more.

Because it's not all about our journeys. And it's not even all about Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem.

Christmas is actually all about Christ's journey to earth---God incarnate, coming to live among us!

Christ's journey to Bethlehem was motivated by only one thing. He did not travel because it was a holiday or because he wanted to eat a big feast with us. He didn't come to live among us because he wanted to go shopping or drive on busy roads.

His reason has been expounded upon by preachers and theologians for many, many years, but it actually doesn't take too many words to say it.

Christ's journey from heaven to Bethlehem was, simply put, a journey of love.

In John 3:16 we read, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him may not perish, but have everlasting life."

"For God so loved the world"----that's what sent Christ on a journey of love.

The world needed to be saved from sin and death. The world needed to be saved from living in darkness and needed to see a great light. The world needed to find hope and learn peace and have reason for joy.

The world needed to know it was loved.

The world still needs to be saved. It still needs to see that God is light. It still needs to have a reason to hope and know how to live in peace and how to find joy in Christ the Lord.

The world still needs---WE still need----to know that WE are loved!

And so when we celebrate Christmas every year, Christ comes to us again on his journey of love, reminding us of what we once knew,

or emphasizing again what we already know----that God loves us enough to send his only son so that we can all be adopted as sons and daughters and made sisters and brothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't know about you, but sometimes Christmas comes just at the right time for me, right at a time when what I need most is to be reminded of God's love for me. And suddenly that love seems new and fresh and overwhelming.

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What we are called to do, as followers of Christ, is all a part of this journey.

Christ is not living in the flesh among us any more as one person.

Christ is living in the flesh as the Body of Christ, as all of us together,

Living in those of us who have accepted him as our savior, who have accepted this gift of God's unfailing grace. And as the Body of Christ we are called to share that gift.

We are called to be on the journey of love in the footsteps of Christ, bringing healing love to a world that lives in darkness. We need to shine the light of Christ so that the people who still walk in darkness will see it, and find hope, peace, and joy

Because they will see by our actions and hear by our words that God loves them!

If we do not show God's love to others, how will they ever believe it's true? If our words are hate-filled and judgmental and ugly, how will anyone hear God's love in what we say and know that it is unconditional and beautiful?

Why would anyone believe in God's love and why would anyone want to accept it if being loved by God makes us hateful and mean?

If we want to bring people to Christ, we have to make his love real in our own lives. If we want to transform the world, we have to begin by transforming ourselves!

And this is our own journey of love----that as we live, we become closer and closer to God's heart, reflecting more and more of Christ's love.

Because we are on this journey of love, each
Christmas finds us closer and closer to Bethlehem, closer and
closer to the manger

Closer and closer to being the people that God created us to be--
-- more loving, more perfect, more whole and more holy!

Christmas is a reminder of the love that is already in our hearts.

Let us love everyone that we meet on our journey of love.

Amen!