



Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 24, 2017

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Don't Overload the Donkey!

Luke 2:1-6

THE INTRODUCTION

There are two gospel writers that tell us about the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ: Matthew and Luke. The two authors have different audiences and purposes, so they emphasize certain details and themes over others. Matthew, for instance, focuses on Joseph and the Magi; Luke upon Mary and the Shepherds. We will read from Luke this morning.

Up to the point of our reading, Luke has given us a great deal of information about the parents of John the Baptist and his birth, and how it overlapped with the angel's announcement to Mary. Joseph and Mary have agreed to follow through on their betrothal and marriage.

Luke cares about the world scene: who's in power and how their actions, unbeknownst to them, serve God's purposes of salvation. By mentioning the Roman Emperor, Augustus, who was known as "the bringer of Peace," Luke is drawing out the irony that the very different "Prince of Peace" was being born in Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph have very little control over the political situation, and they leave Nazareth on an imposed journey to Bethlehem in order to be "enrolled" or "registered," which would have facilitated the Empire's ability to tax them. A fit individual could have made the seventy-mile trip by foot in about four days, but Joseph and Mary are undoubtedly traveling slower and more carefully as she was with child. We only surmise that there was a donkey.

Christmas is closer today, but it's not here yet. Luke wants us to imagine what their journey was like, because it is a spiritual trek that you and I also make.

THE READING

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged

and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

SERMON

I wonder if you caught this news report right after Thanksgiving? The Sudbury police department posted a picture on Facebook of the back of a van that they had pulled over. Somehow the driver had tied onto its top a humongous Christmas tree! In the picture, all one can see of the vehicle, however, is the back left tail light, a portion of the license tag, and a glimpse of its metallic blue color, because the lush, forest green branches formed a mound twice as large as the car, draped over it thickly in all directions!

Mary and Joseph didn't have any wheels, only a donkey, but like this driver, they were on the road to Christmas, as are we. While our Sudbury friend may have been particularly inventive in terms of how he was transporting the tree, I think *all of us* carry quite a load on our way to the holy day.

In the first place, we carry all the material "stuff" we think we'll need for Christmas. Joseph and Mary probably carried provisions of food and water, clothes, blankets, a knife, a bit of cash, but you and I go way beyond this! Santa's bag is not big enough for us! Think, too, of the finances associated with our cargo and the debt we carry to keep a Christmas economy going!

What else? Well, we carry social traditions, family expectations, and current events on the road to Christmas. To be human is to be social, and relationships, whether they are close or distant, knit us together as community for good or for ill. We hold these connections in our minds as we plan and go about activities, trying to stay normal and to nurture hope in these times.

Mary and Joseph knew this kind of weight, too. They didn't have family obligations for Christmas Eve dinner or presents to yet buy, but they kept up the customs of betrothal and marriage as best they could, handling the rumors along the way. They were also Judean pawns without say in the Roman Empire, so they dealt with fickle politicians, and the ebb and flow of census, relocation, and taxation. All of this was undoubtedly on their minds and probably in Joseph's tug on the donkey's bridle.

Naturally, as well, on the road to Christmas, we carry related emotions in our hearts, whether our mood is happy or sad. Maybe we carry excitement, or dread, or both. Is there a "root of bitterness" to be dug out of our souls? I wouldn't be surprised to learn that Joseph carried concerns about his family's wellbeing and Mary about the unknowns of childbirth. As the Brooks' hymn says: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

So on the journey to Christmas, don't we all tend to overload our 'donkeys?' To carry *too much* on ourselves, and to pile the rest on those around us?

Our impression from Luke is that Mary and Joseph, by contrast, *didn't* carry as much baggage into Christmas as you and I do, or it didn't weigh as heavy on them as us; they surely didn't let branches spill over onto *their* windshields. It may be Luke's direct, minimal style of writing – he recounts their journey in just two verses – but we imagine *them* calm and serene, steady and committed. I don't think that *they* overloaded their animal. Indeed, were donkeys able to sing, I project that we'd have heard from theirs: "She ain't heavy, she's my sister."

If such *is* the case, *how* do you think they managed to travel this way?! I think that the clue is in Mary's pregnancy. **Being pregnant, whether actually or metaphorically, well, it helps us keep things in perspective.**

For example, when Steve and I were in mission work in Paris, France, I became pregnant with our first and only child. Five months in, I developed early contractions, which were treated, and at seven months, I was placed on bed rest to be sure the baby didn't arrive too soon. Then, it turned out that he waited three weeks anyway! Back at that earlier point, it really bothered me that I didn't get to attend the childbirth classes; Steve went for me, but it wasn't the same, and I didn't feel at all prepared. I managed myself, though, by remembering that women throughout all of history had given birth without Lamaze classes! And what was *most important* anyway was the child.

Carrying a child gives us more to consider than ourselves. Sure, moms-to-be can have meltdowns; dads and partners can go a bit crazy, but the experience *can* make of you a team. Longing for the child's wellbeing can bring out your better selves and enable you to sacrifice. The baby comes, ready or not, so you *ready*.

It seems to me that on their way to Christmas, Joseph, Mary, and the donkey (on some level) readied by focusing every mile upon the new life they were carrying. They looked forward to loving this little one, who was not their child alone, but God's, the Christ child for the whole world.

A mid-wife readies her moms this way: "If you think of the process of birth labor as a rope *dragging* you to a cliff's edge and doom, while you struggle and resist, you will be filled with terror and anger. *But* if you think of your birth labor as *pulling* on the rope to bring forth something you long for...desire unutterably to see, your work and your bodily groans will be filled with excited purpose and deep determination."¹

It's not too great a theological leap to say that during Advent, even now as late as December 24th, *you and I* are still on the road to Christmas, *and* spiritually 'pregnant' with 'the Christ child.' Luke's gospel is not just an old story, but a *now* story, and *our* story. As we have heard echoed from other scripture texts to today, God is continually doing a new thing for our collective wellbeing, and bringing new life into the world through *us*. As Christians, not just in carrying the name, we are Christ bearers – carrying *our* part of the promise. As the poet suggests: "in his nativity we find ours."²

Through *you*, then, new life is being born in society. You and I *can* simplify the materialism and amplify the hope. As Bob said in a sermon a couple of weeks ago: "Trust God, and do the next thing." As church, *you* are a seed community of trust and justice, and new life is already being born through you, especially as TriCon's proposed Vision puts it: "God is calling us to be a nurturing community of faith that honors God through service and mission." God is working through *you* – your bodies, minds, and hearts, giving birth to new life in your own souls, your relationships, and the surrounding world.

So don't overload the donkey! You need only carry *one thing* on the road to Christmas: the new life that God is bringing into the world through you.

¹Flora Slosson Wuellner, "Transformation: Our Fear, Our Longing," *Weavings* (March-April 1991).

²Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, "What do I want for Christmas?" (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980) p. 34.