

Luke 2:1-21  
December 24, 2009

### Destination Christmas

Millions and Millions of people in our nation travel each Advent and their destination is home for Christmas. The snow storm here in the east last weekend delayed huge numbers of travelers. The weather in the Midwest this week is doing the same. In our family, we know of people that had to change flights five times to get around the weather and be home for Christmas.

As much as we strive to be home for Christmas it is a bit ironic to remember that Mary and Joseph were no where near home for the first Christmas. It was not weather that rerouted them; it was the Empire of Rome. As the story is shared in Luke, it was a taxation issue. A census was demanded and Jewish Joseph had to bring his young bride to the family homestead for Roman registration. Joseph was a descendant of the great King David whose hometown was Bethlehem.

It didn't matter that Mary was pregnant. It didn't matter that this demand was well past inconvenient; clearly in the realm of abusive. It didn't matter that Mary ached every step of the way and worried with every contraction. The empire commanded and the

people complied. Rome spoke; the Jews trembled. Mary and Joseph are far from the comfort of immediate family when Mary delivers her baby and yet Christmas came.

Our destination is Christmas. It's Christmas Eve. For some of us, it seemed like Christmas would never get here. Our destination is Christmas, yet I wonder how we might know when we get there. You know you have arrived at Christmas when God's light enters your soul. You know you have arrived at Christmas when God's love enters your heart. You know you have arrived at Christmas when God's peace engulfs your world.

It's about 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. If we were to pop in our cars and drive it, it would take about an hour and a half, maybe two hours. If we were to walk the distance; it might take three days. If we were to walk the distance while we were nine months pregnant with swollen feet or sitting on top of some bumpy clumpy beast of burden it might take three weeks. For Mary it must have been as exhausting as running a marathon.

Our destination is Christmas, yet I wonder how we might know when the marathon is over and we arrive. Well that's easy says some of the younger folk. You know that Christmas has finally

arrived when you open your presents. Marathons are 26 mile running races which according to legend get their name because a Greek soldier ran from Marathon to Athens to announce victory over the Persians after the Battle of Marathon. After announcing his one word message, "Victory", the runner collapsed. Modern Olympic officials, moved by this tale decided to include marathons when the Olympic games were revived in 1896. This tradition lies behind a cartoon I once saw depicting a marathon runner, carrying a torch, who finally reaches his destination. He is gasping for air, turns to the expectant crowd and says, I forgot the message! I wonder sometimes whether Christmas preparations are such a marathon, we forget the message.

You know you have arrived at Christmas when God's light enters your soul. Messengers of God figure prominently in the Christmas story. The angel Gabriel announces the coming birth of John the Baptist to his father Zechariah in the temple. That same Angel visits Mary and calls her to motherhood. Then angels swoop in again terrifying shepherds. Those Angels out in the fields were bedazzled with bright glory. Their news is so good; it is like light invading darkness. To you is born this day in the city of David a savior. As much as angels shine their light on Christmas, they never

participate directly in the event. Their Job is to announce. Their job is to point the light on Jesus.

Robert Fulghum writes in one of his books about an experience he had with one of his professors <sup>1</sup> At the end of a course, Dr. Alexander Papaderos asked his class if there were any questions. Fulghum, ever the wisecracker asked “what is the meaning of life?” The class laughed but Dr. Papaderos took the question seriously. Taking the wallet from his hip pocket he reached in and pulled out a small quarter sized mirror. He explained to the class that he grew up in a very poor family in Greece during World War Two. They didn’t have much at all. He didn’t have any toys. This fragment was from a broken Nazi motorcycle mirror that he picked up out of the road. To him the mirror was like a treasure, so little Alexander used the mirror as a toy. It was jagged but he rubbed it against stones until he made it smooth and round.

Alexander became fascinated by the fact that he could reflect light into dark places that the sun could never shine. It became a game for him to get light into the hardest darkest places. As he grew

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<sup>1</sup> [It was on Fire when I Lay Down On It](#)

up he kept the mirror and in idle moments continued the challenge of the game – light to dark places.

As Alexander grew up he realized that this was not simply a game, it was a metaphor for what he should do with his life. Dr Papaderos told the class that he realized he was not the light but that he could reflect the light with his life. It was his call to light up dark places with his life.

Papadero told Fulghum “I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world..... Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.” We know that Christmas has arrived when we reflect heaven’s light on other people.

Christmas is one time in the year when people make an extra effort to find real meaning, real joy in their lives. This is when many people make an effort to look into the heart of God. “Maybe this is the year,” people think at the end of the marathon, “when I will be able to finally see God. Maybe this is the year, when I will be able to get a glimpse of who God really is, and how that affects my life.”

Consciously or subconsciously, most people, this time of the year, are trying to catch a glimpse of God.

You know you have arrived at Christmas when with shepherds, you walk up to the edge of the manger and look down on what has captured the focus of Mary and Joseph. This Christmas couple sees a baby, but they see more than a baby. They realize they are staring right into the heart of God. They each realize they could have said no. Mary could have told that angel to hit the trail. Joseph could have gone through with the divorce. They could have chosen the safe route they could have said no to God. They could have gone on with their lives. They could have continued the marathon and left the hard work for others but they risked and they said yes.

CS Lewis once wrote. "There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, [and] dark, [your heart] will

become impenetrable and irredeemable.”<sup>2</sup> Your heart will be safe but it will be hard. You know you have arrived at Christmas when you risk approaching that manger, you risk looking at that child and you risk loving not just God, but the people around you.

As you probably know, Luke wrote the Christmas story some eighty years after Jesus' birth and some fifty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Some people suggest that Mary the mother of Jesus was one of his sources. In any case an author always takes poetic license in the telling of a story. It is interesting to note the various titles Luke uses for Jesus throughout his Christmas story. He uses some Jewish religious titles like throne of ancestor David, Son of David, Lord, descendant of Jacob and Messiah but he also uses some interesting phrases like savior, Son of God, Son of the Most high, liberator . Its not that these words are not Jewish or religious,—it is however true that these words were used to describe the Caesars. These words savior, Son of God, Son of the Most high , liberator were used by Luke to lampoon Rome, to make fun of Rome to tear down Rome. Frankly to call Jesus Savior, Son of God, Son of

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<sup>2</sup> CS Lewis – The inspirational writings of CS Lewis

the Most High was treasonous and dangerous.<sup>3</sup> The angels shout out these titles to the Shepherds and then promise peace to those whom God favors.

There was a peace in Israel and the Mediterranean that was secured by the empire of Rome in the first century. There weren't many wars because no one could stand up to the power of the empire. Rome offered the world peace through military victory. Christ the savior offered peace in an entirely different way. Christ the savior offers peace by treating people with fairness and God's mercy, love and justice.

There are empires today. Political empires, commercial empires, military empires; they offer their various versions of peace and a lot of them don't seem to be working out so well. You know Christmas has arrived when you look that the false promises of those empires. You know that Christmas has arrived when you look and those emperors and as the children's story goes realize they have no clothes. Their promises in the long run are naked and empty.

We have come home to Christmas. We have arrived at Bethlehem to see the Babe. We have come into the stable with Mary

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<sup>3</sup> See Discussion in [The First Christmas](#) by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan

and Joseph. We have witnessed their gazing upon the miracle child. We have looked with them into the heart of God. Now close your eyes and imagine that Mary hands you the baby. Suppose you were given the Christ Child to hold. Mary says to you, here hold Jesus.

Wouldn't that undo you to hold in your arms all God's love for you? <sup>4</sup> To cradle in your hands the prince of peace, the prince who offers a peace that no empire can copy. And that I suspect is precisely God's Christmas plan for each of us, to undo us, to wash over us with a peace that passes all understanding. You know that you have arrived at Christmas when the peace of that infant tender and mild engulfs and surrounds you.

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<sup>4</sup> See "Power Comes to Its Full Strength in Weakness" by William Sloan Coffin in The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin Volume 1 pp22-26