

Prisoners of Hope
Isaiah 62: 6-7, 10-12
Luke 2: 1-7
December 22, 2013 -- Advent 4
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I. Introduction

I obviously don't know how everybody's week has been, but I've been sort of struck by the number of people who've come up to me this week and said, "How did it get to be the week before Christmas already?" And if your house is anything like mine, it's just been a complete frenzy over the last week filled with buying last-minute gifts and getting ready for parties and relatives coming into town and all of those pieces that are part of the usual frantic Christmas season. So, we sort of barrel towards Silent Night at breakneck speed and often, I find myself asking, "Why am I doing this over again just like last year?" I mean, I'm a slow-learner, I get that but every single year, I get to this place and am frustrated with how the season has taken over in ways that I didn't expect it to and wondering why I can't learn how to do it better.

Throughout this Advent, we have been following Mary as she has been journeying towards Bethlehem, and in this morning's reading we find her on the way to Bethlehem. We have an opportunity to reflect on how Mary prepared for that event and what we might learn about how we can prepare to get to Bethlehem ourselves.

II. How do we get to Bethlehem?

There are a couple of different journeys to Bethlehem in the gospels and Matthew's story is actually one that most of us are more comfortable with because Matthew tells the story of the magi traveling to Bethlehem, and the magi do things the

way we want them to be done, right? They study and they prepare and they go on the trip that they had anticipated and they get to their goal, and everything is in good order and as we would hope it would unfold. Mary's journey though I think might be a better metaphor for what most of our lives are like, because Mary's journey is completely unexpected and takes her down a road that she did not anticipate having to go.

The history around this pilgrimage to Bethlehem is a little bit confused. Luke wants us to understand or wants to frame it in the context of the history of the period and he starts off noting that this all happened under the reign of Caesar Augustus which historically it almost certainly did. Augustus had quite a long reign that ended in 14 C.E. But after that, the story starts to get a little bit confused which is interesting because Luke is, by and large, a pretty good historian. He tells us that Caesar Augustus had called for a census of the Roman Empire, which we don't have any historical record of ever happening. And when the Romans did do censuses, and usually it was fairly geographically based, they never required the family to go to the town in which their family originated. They tended to take the census right where they were. It gets also a little bit confused because Luke tells us that Quirinius was the governor of Syria, which started in the Year 6, and Quirinius did actually annex a good part of Judah, so he would've been in charge of that part of the countryside, and he did take a census that was enormously unpopular at that time. The problem is that Luke also tells us that Herod was king, and Herod had died two years before Quirinius entered office. So, the history of it starts to get a little bit complicated, and Biblical scholars spent a lot of ink trying to noodle through what Luke may have been trying to

say, all of which I had to read and none of it frankly is good sermon material. So, we're going to pass on trying to understand that.

But the primary theme is very clear which is that Mary is caught up in a series of historical events over which she has no control and that have taken her away from her hometown, away from her support network, the people who were going to be most critical to her during her pregnancy. Events have taken her to a town that she doesn't know with a man that she barely knows at the point that she's about to give birth.

We all have heard the metaphor that life is a journey, but Mary's journey is not the kind that most of us would want to go on, right? We like the magi's journey. They understand how to do this right. They've got it all plotted out and it all unfolds according to their plan. But again, I suspect for most of us, our journey often feels a little bit more like Mary's, where the pace and the direction of the journey seem imposed from the outside on us and we've got to play catch-up all the way along, where we don't feel like we have the support systems that we need and we feel subject to somebody else's plans and sometimes somebody else's whims.

It may be a job that we feel stuck in and a boss that is difficult to work with -- my own staff here could attest to that. It could be that we've been told that we've got a medical condition that we didn't know about or a loved one has a medical condition that now we've got to figure out how to accommodate. It could be a school schedule that is onerous and imposed from without. It could be a relationship that is taking a turn that we didn't expect. But a lot of us spend a lot of time angry and frustrated, that

we're on a journey that we hadn't planned to be on and that somehow feels imposed on us.

III. So what do we learn from Mary's journey?

So, what do we learn from Mary about her journey to Bethlehem? The first thing to note from Luke's text obviously is that while Mary's journey is necessitated by the rule of Rome and/or the governors of her province and was not something that she had any choice in, Luke also wants us to understand that in spite of that or through that, God continues to work out God's plan for her and for Jesus. In spite of the fact that she is on a journey to a place she doesn't know, on a dark and difficult path that she wasn't anticipating, God is using that to get her to where she needs to go to give birth to the Messiah. It's not to say that God caused those events, but it is to say that God works through some of the unexpected events of our lives to work out God's Will for the world. And the message there is that perhaps instead of being angry and resentful about the left turns that sometimes life takes, maybe if we were to focus on where God might be moving in those situations, we would have a different kind of experience.

It's very easy to get angry and resentful when life does not unfold as we had it planned, and what Mary invites us to think about is that even in those cases, God is still at work, God is still in charge, and our call is to watch for those places, unexpected, maybe unwanted, but to watch for those places where God is working and inviting us to be part of that process.

A month ago, just to pick an example, I had no idea that so much of our church's energy and focus would be wrapped up in the issue of marriage equality. It just wasn't even on my radar. And a whole series of events have fallen into place that we had no control over but have had to respond to in terms of Reverend Frank Schaefer's clergy credentials being stripped from him this week in the face of some pretty interesting and dramatic pronouncements by some of our bishops, that our church is in the wrong place on the issue of homosexuality, from that to, frankly, *Duck Dynasty*. I know many of you don't watch *Duck Dynasty* but apparently that has now fed into the whole marriage equality debate as well. All of these pieces seem to be bringing us to a place where we've got to address this in a more active way. Our church has been very clear about where we stand -- our local congregation has been very clear that we stand in favor of marriage equality, but we are now caught up in a series of events that is beyond us, that is moving us in a more aggressive way to address this issue. I didn't expect it even a month ago.

To pick another example, Christmas has unfolded for many of us in ways that we did not expect, some good and some maybe not. And again, the invitation here is to look at where God might be moving this week in a way that you didn't expect God to move. Maybe there is an opportunity this week to engage a friend or a family member in some healing and reconciling of a relationship that has been broken, and you didn't have any sense that this was going to be an opportunity but it's in front of you. Maybe you have an opportunity in a Christmas party, in a Christmas gathering, in some place that you weren't expecting, to have the opportunity to speak a word of good news, a word of hopefulness and grace and love to someone that needs to hear

it. Where are the places in the midst of an unexpected, sometimes unwanted unfolding of Christmas where God is giving you an opportunity to engage in a different kind of way and to see God work in a way that maybe you hadn't planned?

Part of what allows Mary to do this, of course, is that she is seeing all that is happening within the framework of God's promise to her, that this unasked for and unintended pregnancy is in reality a tremendous gift from God, not only to her but to the entire world. And so, she frames this journey, she understands this journey in the light of God's ultimate promise for how God is going to work out God's plan of salvation. This means that her journey is a piece of the puzzle of God's great plan for reconciling humanity to God's self.

That's what Isaiah is talking about in our passage this morning. Isaiah -- and this is the very end of that book and it's a writer that we call Third Isaiah, he's the third prophet of that name or taking that mantle -- is writing to people who are just back in Jerusalem from having been in exile in Babylon, that walls are torn down, the temple is destroyed, and they've got to rebuild from scratch. It's a place none of them expected to be. And Isaiah reminds them of God's ultimate promise that Jerusalem is to be the place from which salvation spreads across all of the face of the earth, and so, they better get to work because God's plan is going to come to fruition.

In our creed, when we say that we believe that Christ will come again in glory, what we are saying is that we understand history to have an end, we understand that history is not just one darn thing after another, endlessly moving forward, but history has a goal and a purpose. That as Dr. King told us, the arc of history is long but it

bends towards justice, that God's justice and God's righteous and God's kingdom will be brought forth and that we can trust in that promise, that the work that we do has a goal and an endpoint.

Isaiah also uses this wonderful image of the watchman on the walls of Jerusalem looking out for where God might be at work in the world. But not just watching, not just watching passively. Isaiah tells the watchman to hold God to account for God's promises. He says, "You on the walls remind the Lord and take no rest and give Him no rest until He establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the Earth." In other words, we are called simultaneously to trust in God's promise and God's goal for the world but also to remind God of God's promise, to hold God accountable, to hold in prayer that God bring about the kingdom that God has promised. So, our longing for that kingdom takes voice in our prayers to God. So, in the place of darkness, the journey that has taken its turn that we didn't anticipate, our prayer is to see where God is bringing the kingdom about in that moment, in this moment. Where in your life is God bringing the kingdom about and how do we participate in that with God?

Luke doesn't tell us that Mary prayed along this journey to Bethlehem but I have absolutely no doubt that she spent a great deal of time on that donkey praying for God's will to come to birth in her, praying for God's will to come to birth in the world. And our call is to trust that God's kingdom will come about and to pray that God bring it about soon. Our call, like Isaiah's watchman, is to watch out for where God might be at work and to call on God to make that work visible and apparent to us and to the world around us.

IV. Conclusion

Mary's journey is our journey. It's a journey that we may not have expected. It's a journey we may not have wanted. It's a journey we may not want right now. But Mary reminds us that in the midst of the darkness and uncertainty of a journey that may feel imposed on us, God continues to be at work. God continues to be at work in us and in the world, bringing about the kingdom that God has promised us, and our invitation is to watch for those places, to be open to where God might be moving so that we can become part of that as we move towards Bethlehem.

Amen.