

“The Angels’ Hopeful Song”

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 12-24-18
At Crossroads United Methodist Church
Waunakee, WI

It is approximately 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. According to Google Maps, it would take 34 hours to travel it on foot, not counting stops for rest. And of course Google does not factor in extras such as bandits on the loose, deep rain-washed wadis cutting through road, inns with no room, or full-term pregnancies. But this long, tiring, unpredictable journey is, according to Luke, precisely what Mary and Joseph undertake.

It is not as though they have a choice. This is no vacation fling to the old stomping grounds. Caesar Augustus has spoke, and like it or not, everybody has to register in the town of their ancestry. Joseph lives in Nazareth but has roots in Bethlehem, and that is that.

Days and days of dangerous travel begin, and the whole exhausting journey is just to fill out some government forms. Compared to this, the time Jane and I spent trying to keep ourselves occupied in the DMV waiting room a couple of weeks ago, seems hardly worth grumbling over.

For Luke, the mandate from Rome and the journey of two peasants from Galilee to Judea are not primarily historical or geographical matters, but theological ones. The question for Luke is where hope might be found for people like Joseph and Mary.

They are, like poor people everywhere and in every time, at the whim of whatever caesar or power happens to lash out in their direction. Caesar issues a decree, drinks another glass of wine, eats a cluster of grapes – and Joseph and Mary pack and head out on the Roman “interstate” to Judea.

There is an irony in this story. And that is that while Joseph, Mary, and their unborn child are headed to Bethlehem to be counted, in fact they do not count, not to Rome anyway. They are faceless nobodies under the boot of an uncaring empire.

Their only hope – if they have any hope at all -- is not in Caesar Augustus, who is forcing this trip, but in the God of Israel, who accompanies them even when they walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

My friends, I grew up at a time that expected the youngest generation to have life a little bit better off than their parent’s generation. We became even more confident of our potential and our promise.

But my suspicion is that the more you expect growth and the more you expect life to be better than it was for your parents, the need for real hope takes a hit.

As someone has once said, we begin to express our longings for the future as “hope nots.” “I hope the stock market doesn’t tank again this week. I hope my children don’t get hooked on opioids. I hope I don’t get Alzheimer’s when I get old – all expressions of the fact that we were streaming ahead, simply hoping that no icebergs get in the way.

If, as the scripture says, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” then we soon lost faith because the things we could see, and hold on to, and store up, were no longer satisfying.

Even in the 21st century; even today, we are now all Josephs and Marys, compelled to travel the weary road.

But the road leads to Bethlehem, and a manger of surprising hope awaits us there. St. Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians: “We felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”

From a prison cell, awaiting probable execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer compares life in a prison cell

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to the hope of Advent: “One waits, hopes, does this, that, or the other—things that are really of no consequence—the door is shut and can only be opened from the outside.”

If we are not always confident of progress—no longer confident of empty promises of peace—maybe we are ready again for the hope and wonder of Bethlehem. Like pregnant Mary, we suddenly realize that we have been carrying the true all long: God with us: Emmanuel

Listen! Hear once again, sounding over Bethlehem, the angels’ hopeful song of the only peace worth trusting.