

Walking the Road to Bethlehem
“THE JOURNEY: MARY”

Scripture lesson: Luke 1:26-38 – *First Sunday of Advent*

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Ann Weems’ book has a poem, “In Search of Our Kneeling Places,” in which she writes:

*In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
 An inn were we must ultimately answer
 Whether there is room or not.
 When we are Bethlehem bound,
 We experience our own advent in his.*

She then invites her readers to use Advent as a time to go to “Bethlehem and find our kneeling places.”

Our theme for this Advent season is Walking the Road to Bethlehem. The hope is that we will hear this story in a new way that will allow us to experience our own Advent in his.

The thing about any journey is that it requires movement. In order to get somewhere you have to leave where you are and set forth to where you want to be. You can’t just stay put. You have to leave behind the familiar, which for some people is threatening. It’s easier to stay put. But of course, you don’t get anywhere by staying put. You can get stuck, inertia takes over, life becomes a repetition of the same old things, the same old routines, mistakes, traps. To get somewhere different, you have to take to the road.

That was the case with the first Christmas story. For all who participated, it required a journey, a movement from what was to what would be. In Luke’s Gospel, this required a physical journey of 80 or so miles from the town of Nazareth, north of Jerusalem, south to Bethlehem. In our thinking, it was a short drive. But for a man and his pregnant wife, in that time, that journey would have taken four or five days on foot, over rough and sometimes dangerous roads. In popular imagination, Mary made the journey on a donkey, but there is no biblical reference for that, and given her condition, that seems unlikely.

But there is more to this story than the physical journey, there was also a spiritual journey which had to be made. A journey which required those involved to leave the life they knew, for the life to which God had called them. Life in Nazareth would have been simple. It was a small town of no consequence, the kind of place where everyone knew who your mommy and daddy were.

Everyone in town would have known Mary. Her life would have been filled with the simple tasks of everyday life. She would have had chores to do from an early age: she would have carried water from the town well, helped her mother grind the wheat to bake the bread that was a staple of their diet. Like every girl, she no doubt dreamed one day of having a family of her own. What she couldn’t have dreamed or imagined was what happened to her.

According to Luke, Mary was betrothed to a man named Joseph. Some scholars believe that Mary was no more than 13 or 14 when this happened. Given life expectancy in those days, marriage came at an earlier age. Betrothal meant that the two people were committed to each other as much as a married couple would be. The only parts of the marriage not yet completed were the formal

"huppah" ceremony followed by their physical union. This betrothal was considered so binding that the only way to break it was by an actual bill of divorcement. It could last for up to a year as preparations for marriage took place.

For Mary, these preparations were interrupted in an unlikely way. Luke says that, *the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.*

The name given to this story is The Annunciation which means simply the announcement. Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to a child and to call him Jesus. From the beginning, we are to understand that God is the primary actor here. But we are also to understand that God's primary way of working is through human beings. Luke takes care to tell us that Mary was betrothed to Joseph, of the house of David. Jesus is fully within history, fully human. But there is more.

When asked how this can be, since her marriage was yet to be consummated, Mary is told, *the Holy Spirit will come over you...and the power of the most high will overshadow you.* Jesus will also be the Son of God, which means that Mary was the first to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God's Messiah. But she does more than hear this announcement; she has a part to play in it. It is through her that God will act.

Luke records Mary's answer to the angel: *Let it be with me according to your word.* Mary is not just a passive actor she actively consents to become the mother of Jesus. She, in fact, becomes the first disciple of Jesus. She models for us what discipleship looks like.

First of all, Mary hears God's word addressed to her. Even though she was afraid, even though what she heard was beyond her ability to understand at first, even though these words meant that all of her plans for the future would be radically altered, Mary listened.

It might not sound like much now, but all of us choose what we really listen to. In fact, we have to. We live in a world of sensory overload – of telephones, text messages, emails, twitters, commercials, not to mention print media. There is simply too much to take in so we have to be selective to what we pay attention. We use caller ID to screen our calls, we delete emails if we don't know who they are from. The question is do we screen out God?

My great-grandfather, whose name I bear, was the telegraph operator for Southern Railroads here in Birmingham for years. Sounds kind of quaint in a world of instant messaging, but in those days you sent messages using Morse code, it was the fastest means of long-distance communication.

There is a story of a young man who applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, noisy office. In the background, a telegraph clacked away. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man completed his form and sat down with seven other applicants. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. The other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. Why had this man been so bold? They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet.

Within a few minutes the young man emerged from the inner office escorted by the interviewer who announced to the other applicants, *Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man.*

The other applicants began grumbling. Then one spoke up saying, *Wait a minute — I don't understand something. He was the last one to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair.*

The employer said *I'm sorry, but all the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse code: If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours. None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. So the job is his.*

Maybe there were other young girls to whom God wished to speak before Mary. But Mary becomes the first disciple by hearing the Word. God has to wait for someone to listen before he can accomplish his purposes in the world.

But Mary not only heard, she assented, she accepted it, she said yes to God. *Let it be to me according to your will.* We've all heard the oft repeated phrase, "Just say no." It's been used to respond to drugs, food and even other people's way of making boundaries. Learning what to say no to is an important function in our lives. It serves to protect us. But sometimes we say no because we are afraid. Sometimes we say no because we are apathetic, we don't care. And some of our no's are just expressions of our prejudices or our cynicism.

Just as important as learning to say "no," is learning to say "yes." A life of no's – of non-commitment – is a life without hope or creativity. Someone has written that if "no" is the savior, "yes" is the creator. "No" is defensive, "yes" is empowering. It is not enough to know what you are against, more important is what we are for. What do we say "yes" to?

And Mary said, 'Yes' when the angel came,
 Not knowing all it would mean.
 For 'yes' was only the beginning.
 'Yes' to giving birth in a cold, dark stable,
 While cows and sheep looked on.
 'Yes' to a sword that pierced her soul, as her
 Son died on a cross, while she looked on.
 And Mary said, 'Yes, let it be.'
 But do I? Do I say, 'Yes' when God calls to me?
 Oh, not through an angel who comes in the night
 But maybe a pastor who asks
 If I'll lead a Sunday school class;
 Or a former friend
 Who calls to mend our broken relationship;
 Or a stranger who wonders
 If I might spare some change for food.
 And for a moment as I ponder what to say,
 Does God's purpose flicker like a flame
 In a sudden breeze,
 To be snuffed out by 'no,'
 Or to burn even brighter with the power if 'yes'?
 God needs to hear my 'yes'
 As much as he needed to hear Mary's.

Mary is the model of discipleship because she said "yes."

And thirdly, because she shares and interprets this Word for others. Immediately following the story of the Annunciation, Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She shares the Good News of

what God is doing and gives expression to what it means: *He has shown the strength of his arm and has scattered the proud...he has filled the hungry with good things, he has helped his servant Israel.*

Mary calls herself a handmaiden of the Lord, a term that means servant. She points us to that life of *servant discipleship* in which we become a part of what God does to bring good news to the least and lost, to join him in redeeming and restoring the world.

To take this journey to Bethlehem with Mary, we must, hear, accept, and act.