

MEDITATE ON CHRISTMAS JOURNEYS

Luke 1:39-45,56, Luke 2:8-11,15-17,20, Matthew 2:1-18 and Luke 2:25-32
(Lingering Christmastide Message on New Years Eve) -- Pastor Richard P. Carlson

At the heart of the Christmas message is the wonderful truth of God's pursuit of every one of us. The Holy Spirit has turned my heart aside to look today at the journeys of Christmas, along with the greatest journey of them all--God's journey from Heaven's portals in Glory to earth, to Bethlehem, then on to the cross. As Paul said in Galatians 4: 4,5, "When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law that we might receive the adoption as sons." Christmas is the story of God's pursuit, His journey to earth in search of Adam and Eve after the fall. It is also the story of God's journey to earth, searching for you and for me.

Millions of people travel at this time of the year, and that includes many of us. Christmas is all about journeys. As I pondered this reality, the Spirit of God took me on journey after journey in the Christmas accounts relating to the birth of Jesus in the Scriptures. I paused to consider seven journeys—(1) The journey of Mary to Elizabeth's house, (2) The journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem from Nazareth, (3) The journey of the shepherds from their fields of lambing sheep to the stable where Jesus lay in a manger, (4) The journey of the wise men from the East to Bethlehem, (5) The journey of Herod, via his hordes, to go to Bethlehem, (6) The ensuing journey of Joseph and Mary with the baby Jesus down to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod, and (7) The trip of Simeon from his home in Jerusalem to the temple when Jesus was presented to the Lord. Mike/Steve read about these seven journeys, six of them wonderful, and one of them, the result of the enraged wrath and jealousy of wicked King Herod.

Six of these seven journeys were awesome faith journeys. Each trip had some intrigue to it, with lessons for us to learn. Six of the seven journeys carried with them some degree of danger, cost, and risk. All the journeys have deep lessons we need to learn. Before we study the seven Christmas journeys, one journey not taken stands out to me. I am amazed the religious leaders in Jesus' day knew the Word of God, and told Herod exactly where Messiah, the King of the Jews was to be born, but did not go the five miles down the hill to see Him. They knew about the tiny village of Bethlehem. Yet, tragically, no trip was made by these men known to be men of God. They made no attempt to see this King of the Jews reported to be born. It is the saddest story. It is the Christmas journey never taken.

Here is a huge warning to us all as God's leaders. We need to know and memorize the Word so well we know where passages are found quickly as the scribes and chief priests did. Yet, we may know the Word backwards and forwards, and yet reject God's messages, His Holy Spirit promptings, and dig in our heels never going where He calls us to go. I call us on this New Years Eve Sunday to look at these seven journeys taken, six of them godly and one a horrifying journey. What lessons do each of these seven journeys have for us on this New Years Eve, and for the rest of our lives? Each journey pivots on the word "willing or unwilling to follow the Lord."

BE WILLING TO FOLLOW GOD'S DIVINE HINTS WITHOUT DELAY WHEN YOU KNOW HE IS THE SOURCE. (I.)

This is the journey of Mary up to the home of Elizabeth after the angel Gabriel told Mary she would bear the Christ-child. The whole story is told in Luke 1:26-56. Has God ever given you a divine hint and no more, but you knew it was from Him? Turn to the words of Gabriel to Mary in Luke 1:36,37. We read “And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God. If we heard a barren couple in our church who had prayed for years was expecting, would it be a hint to go celebrate with them the good news? What if they like Zechariah and Elizabeth were in their late 60’s or 70’s and expecting a baby? Would it be a divine hint for us to make a journey to their home to celebrate the miraculous news? In Israel, for a woman to be past child-bearing time and still be barren was a terrible disgrace, a shame, and a reproach on the family without children. Most Bible scholars believe Elizabeth was far beyond childbearing years. For her to be pregnant, would she be able to carry the baby to completion? And who would she tell? Would she be uncertain about telling others?

Interestingly, God often works in doubles. The same angel Gabriel who appeared to Zacharias to announce the coming birth of John the Baptist, the same angel brought Mary her birth announcement that she would bear the Son of God. God is the God who delights in taking away barrenness. He is the God of Sarah, Hannah, Ruth, and Elizabeth. God loves to bring to barren women laughing joy. Mary was not sure immediately who to tell about the angel Gabriel’s visit, but she had news to tell, and who would believe her? If others knew she was pregnant, would they want to stone her? Who would Mary tell? What would Joseph say? What would her parents say? Who would believe Mary’s story? We can be sure Mary told her parents and Joseph she felt an inner compelling to go visit Elizabeth. Whatever was needed, Mary had been given a divine hint, and she was off to the hill country of Judea—no small journey from Nazareth. This 14–18-year-old young virgin, carrying baby Jesus, just conceived inside her by the overshadowing Holy Spirit, she was of, and it was 80-100 miles from Nazareth to Hebron, formerly Kiriath-arba, the land Caleb conquered. Mary knew how to take a divine hint—now she had someone she knew she could tell, and amazingly, by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth told her that God had revealed to her Mary’s story, calling her the mother of my Lord. What a long journey for Mary to take. She made it. PTL!

When I think of Mary’s journey, I often think of Amy Grant’s song she re-wrote with Christopher Eaton’s permission in 1992, writing it from the perspective of herself being pregnant and expecting her own child. The words are profound about this first journey. “I have traveled many moonless nights Cold and weary with a babe inside And I wonder what I've done Holy Father you have come And chosen me now to carry Your Son I am waiting in a silent prayer I am frightened by the load I bear In a world as cold as stone Must I walk this path alone? Be with me now Be with me now Breath of heaven Hold me together Be forever near me Breath of heaven Breath of heaven Lighten my darkness Pour over me Your holiness For You are holy Breath of heaven Do You wonder as You watch my face If a wiser one should have had my place But I offer all I am For the mercy of your plan Help me be strong Help me be Help me Breath of heaven.” There’s a 2nd willingness needed.

BE WILLING TO FOLLOW GOD’S DESIRES BY SIMPLY OBEYING THE LAWS OF OUR LAND. (II.)

God help us, you and me. Speed laws, tax laws, no-texting while driving in Wyoming, or no cell phone use in Rock Springs. This journey is kind of a strong, smarting Christmas message for all of us. and it is found in our text in Luke 2:3. Joseph was told, doubtless by a courier from Jerusalem, no doubt coming on horseback to Bethlehem that Caesar who ruled all the known world including Israel, that each man must register for a census in their birth city. We read in Luke 2:3-5, “And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. Some laws make good sense, and other “laws of the land” often don’t seem to make sense. We can ignore them and fight them and be caught disobeying them. But God wants us to realize His Word is true. Romans 13:1 states, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”

How many of us can truly say, “Okay, Lord! I surrender.” That’s why Joseph and Mary found themselves traveling when Mary was close to giving birth to Jesus. Obeying local or national authorities, as long as they do not violate the Bible or biblical morality—that can be a tough journey. As we grumble inside about not using our cell phones in Rock Springs, Joseph and Mary were on a long journey over rough terrain. Why? Because it was God’s design and desire, and He would fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5: 2 and do so by the obedience of Joseph and Mary to Caesar’s decree. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem spanned is 90 miles, across unpaved terrain, steep slopes, tremendous changes in elevation from Nazareth at 1,138 feet above sea level to Bethlehem that is 2,543 feet above sea level. It is likely Mary and Joseph only covered ten-twelve miles each day. That’s over a week of hard travel. It reminds me of an old spiritual, “Do you think I’ll make a soldier, soldier of the cross, Do you think I’ll make my journey, soldiers of the cross, If I stumble, will you help me, Soldiers of the cross, Though the road is steep and rugged, we’ll keep traveling Home, soldiers of the cross.” A 3rd willingness:

BE WILLING TO FOLLOW GOD’S MESSAGE WHEN THE PERSONAL RISK AND COST IS HIGH. (III.)

Notice the journey on foot of the shepherds from their fields outside of Bethlehem. We read in Luke 2:15, “When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.” The song, “Rise Up Shepherds And Follow!” says, “Leave your herds and leave your lambs. Leave your ewes and leave your rams.” Why? The angel said, Luke 2:11,12. “For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.” Is our response that of the shepherds, when the personal cost is risky and high for us? When God prompts us by His Spirit, through His Word, by a preached message by our pastor, our husband, our wife, a brother or sister in Jesus or a friend, are we willing to drop

everything to follow Jesus? Proverbs 3:5,6 is still our message. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.” Will we submit to God’s will through His messengers? Proverbs 19:20 tells us, “Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.” I Corinthians 10:31 adds, “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all for the glory of God.” A 4th willingness:

BE WILLING TO FOLLOW THE SIGNS GOD GIVES WHEN THEY ARE REMOTE AND THE JOURNEY MAY BE LONG. (IV.)

This is the story of the magi/the wise men. They came to Jerusalem asking in Matthew 2:2, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star (in the east) when it rose, and have come to worship Him.” These astrologers, not likely worshippers of God, must have read the Book of Daniel, for he was one of the wisest of all the wise men of Persia. They read about Messiah the Prince in Daniel 9:25, of the coming of the Anointed One. They read the Word. That’s a good place to start. Martin Luther once said, “Scripture is the cradle of the Christ.” He’s right, for the Bible is a kind of manger in which the baby Jesus is lying. John Stott once said, “If you want to find Jesus, you must pick up the Bible and read it, for the overriding purpose of the Bible is to point people to Jesus Christ.” But how would the Lord show the magi/wise men where or when the Christ should be born. God decided that these seeking stargazers who read the remotest signs in the night sky needed a star to lead them to their Messiah, and He sent them one.

My dear friend, Gadiel Isidro, founder and president of El International, a seminary in the Philippines, sent me his conclusion about the star. Gadiel is now Home with Jesus. We went to seminary together. He wrote this to me. “The star which guided the wise men was not a natural star which miraculously got out of its orbit. Instead, this was an angelic being for we read in Exodus 14:19 that the angel of God was identical with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night who guided Israel during its 40 years of wilderness wanderings. There we read, “Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them coming between the host of Egypt and host of Israel. And there was the cloud and darkness, And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. Then in Exodus 33:9, we read.

“Whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent/tabernacle. the pillar of cloud talked to Moses and in v. 11 it was in the pillar of cloud that God talked to Moses face to face. In Numbers 12:5, God came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tabernacle. In Numbers 14:13-14, when God was going to destroy Israel and make of Moses a nation greater and mightier than they were, Moses talked with God and told Him, “The Egyptians will hear of it, for You brought up this people in Your might from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, O Lord, are in the midst of this people. For You, O Lord, are seen face to face, and Your cloud stands over them and You go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.” Again, we read in Deut. 31:15 “And the Lord appeared in the tent in a pillar of cloud. And the pillar of cloud stood over the entrance of the tent. “

Then we read in the New Testament in II Peter 1:19, that the Lord Jesus Christ is called the Day Star who shines in our hearts--(Greek: fwsforoj phosphoros) and in Rev. 22:16 Jesus is given the title Bright and Morning Star. As the Day Star, He shines in our hearts at the moment of our conversion. So, Gadiel Isidro, said, "My conclusion is that that star that guided the wise men was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who guided them to Himself!" The wise men, saved by following the Star-Jesus, laid their gifts before Jesus. It is dangerous to ignore signs God gives us that appear and keep pointing us to Him. A fifth willingness rejected:

BE WILLING TO FOLLOW THE LORD WHEN IT MEANS WE MUST HUMBLE OURSELVES TO WORSHIP HIM. (V.)

Matthew 2:16-18 reads, "Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all the region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men." Herod's journey did not bring him to Bethlehem to worship Jesus. Rather, he sent hordes and legions of soldiers to kill Jesus. When the enemy gets his jealousy and anger into those who reject Jesus, every Satan follower can become a beast in what such men and women can say and do. It happens in marriages. It happens in church. It happens at work. Men and women who don't get their way start cursing and swearing. They make a trip, for sure, but it is not a trip that brings anything else but sorrow. Like Rachel weeping for her murdered children without comfort, so those who don't worship Jesus, can end up defying, killing, and persecuting Jesus' followers. Only the humble can cease to be Herod's and journey to kneel to worship Jesus. A sixth willingness:

BE WILLING TO FOLLOW THE LORD WHEN IT MEANS MOVING FAST RIGHT NOW. (VI.)

Look at Matthew 2:12-15. I see not one, but two journeys moving in a new direction fast—immediately. We read, "And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the wise men departed to their own county another way. The wise men didn't know the land of Israel but they paved a new way home, but not through Jerusalem, past King Herod. Yes, with God's help, they tricked Herod. The wise men departed to their country ahead of Herod's troops. That is fast. Then in Mt. 2:13-15 we read, "Now when they, the wise men had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy Him. And he arose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." It would not have been easy in the night to arise and depart for Egypt. This was not I-80. But like the wise men, Joseph and Mary acted immediately and escaped the hordes of maddening hoofs as Herod's legions came to destroy Jesus. There are journeys ahead for each of us to get up and go now—move quickly. One of those for me was in late February when I drove in a giant blizzard home to be with my mother for the last 6 days of her life. When I faced closed roads, I took side roads both north and south, and God brought me with my sister Ruth that I picked up in Greeley, to Mom's side. Thirty-six hours before Mom died, she woke me up and told me what to preach at her funeral.

This past summer, we were trying to get a vacation, when I awoke and told Jinny, “We need to go now and visit Janell Huff before God takes her home.” She had been in a coma, but when we walked into their home, Janell woke up and I asked her, “Do you know who I am?” She answered me, “Pastor Carlson.” Most of the time rushing is not wise, but sometimes it is now or never. Once in 1996, God wouldn’t let Jinny or me sleep. It was after midnight, but we started talking and we knew God was sending us to a home here in Rock Springs where everything depended on going right then. It was a visit I will never forget. The effects of that night are still powerfully being used of God today. A seventh willingness:

BE WILLING TO FOLLOW THE LORD WHEN IT SEEMS LIKE

WAITING ON HIM HAS TAKEN WAY TOO LONG. (VII.) The directions God gave to Abraham took 25 years to be fulfilled. Who knows how long Simeon waited to hear God say, “Today, go to the temple. Go now!?” Luke 2:25-32 is the story of Simeon, an aged righteous and devout believer in Messiah, was awaiting Messiah’s coming to earth. Simeon, led by the Holy Spirit made a short journey, from his home in Jerusalem to God’s house, the temple there in Jerusalem. God had told Simeon he would not see death until he had seen the Lord’s Christ, Luke 2:26 I believe shortly after Simeon’s viewing of Jesus, Simeon went on his longest earthly journey, from earth, Home to God’s presence in Abraham’s bosom. What did he say after holding the Lord’s Christ? Luke 2:29-32 is clear. Simeon said, “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word, for my eyes have seen Your salvation, that You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, that’s us, and for glory to Your people, Israel.” Thou dost let Thy bondservant depart in peace, according to Thy word, For my eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, A light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.” Simeon’s last earthly trip led to his last trip of God taking Him to His arms of love.

Beloved, there may many of us here that are on a journey, or soon to embark on a journey. Should you be? Has God been hinting at a journey for you? Has God called you to a journey to start obeying all the laws, even the cumbersome and difficult texting and cell phone laws that may spare our lives? Has God called you to follow one of His messages from one of His messengers? Has He called you to follow a sign which keeps showing up and may be an extension of His will for you? Has He called you to worship Him, (I know He has!) Has God called you to submit and surrender to Him your anger, wrath, and jealousy? Has the Lord called you to follow Him fast right now—to move out to do His bidding on a task even today? Has the Lord called you, like Simeon to follow Him in a stretching venture, even in your elderly years, when it seems you have waited too long for His answer in a specific matter you know He has led you in? What Christmas journeys are you on? Are you about to pack for one of these journeys? Are you willing like Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, Joseph, and Mary, as Jesus’ earthly parents, or Simeon to do God’s bidding? If so, you’ll soon be on another journey. Or are you traveling on Herod’s unbelieving angry road? Which way are you traveling? Let’s pray!