

Christmas Restores Hope Unwanted Journeys

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(Pastor enters platform with a suitcase which he places on a small table.)

When it comes to the journey we are on called life, we have certain expectations. We want our lives to go smoothly. We have dreams and plans and we expect for them to be fulfilled. Sometimes our lives take unexpected detours—we find ourselves on unwanted journeys. We encounter the unexpected: (Pastor opens suitcase and removes T-Shirts, displays the message on back and reads to congregation)

Death
Illness
Divorce
Addictions

Mary and Joseph took an unwanted journey. It was not exactly how Mary envisioned having her first child. Her life was dramatically altered by the decisions of others. Listen again to their story.

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:1-7

Like most young women, Mary had dreams about her future. She would marry Joseph. That arrangement had been made by her parents. They would have a nice wedding. Since she came from a peasant home, she did not expect a big wedding but there would be lots of family and friends. Joseph would build a room onto his parent's house where they would live. When the room was finished, he and the groomsmen would come unexpectedly in the middle of the

night and sweep up her and the bridesmaids in a festive procession to the wedding site. It would be a glorious party lasting for several days. After being married for a year or so, she would get pregnant and would give birth to their first child. Again they would be surrounded by family and friends awaiting the announcement of the birth of a healthy baby boy.

Such plans were not unusual for young women in the Middle East. If you talk to a young woman today she will tell you her ideal age for getting married; what kind of wedding she would like to have; and when she would like to have children—and how many if any.

Mary's dreams would be dramatically altered by others. She became engaged to Joseph. Engagements typically lasted a year before the wedding. During the engagement period, the angel Gabriel shows up and changes Mary's plans. She is going to have a baby sooner than anticipated. In fact, she will become pregnant before she gets married. Joseph will not be the father of this child. She will conceive a very special child by the power of the Holy Spirit. He will be the long anticipated Messiah—who will save his people from their sin. Pregnant and not yet married. This was not a journey that Mary wanted. What would Joseph say? Would he still marry her? What would her parents say? How vicious would the gossip be about her and the speculation about the father of her child? This was not the journey that Mary had planned for her life.

Mary agreed to the journey that God asked her to take. It would be a difficult journey but she had confidence that God would go with her. Joseph did not take the news well. He resolved to divorce her—but quietly. He did not want

to make a public spectacle out of this, but he was deeply hurt and felt betrayed. This was not exactly the journey that Joseph had anticipated either. He had his dreams for a family with Mary. Now she was carrying someone else's child. What else could a guy do? He could no longer trust Mary. He had to end the relationship. An angel appeared to him and confirmed what Mary had said about the child. He was relieved that she had told him the truth. He would take her as his wife. But this was certainly not the wedding or the future they had dreamed about.

They got married and prepared a place for the baby in their home. She anticipated some of her family being present for the birth. Some were still judging her and said they would have nothing to do with her. But some chose to be there for her, even though they did not believe her story about the angel. She was family, and that was all that mattered to them.

Then came another unwanted journey. She was nine months pregnant when Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census would be taken of the entire Roman world. He wanted to make sure everyone was on the tax rolls—especially in the countries they had conquered. He ordered everyone to return to the city of their birth. Joseph was born in Bethlehem. He and Mary now lived in Nazareth. It was a long trip under the best of circumstances. The two towns are about 80 miles apart. The journey would take 7 to 9 days on foot. The Romans had no sympathy for those who were ill or pregnant. They gave a deadline, and everyone was expected to meet it. Joseph and Mary would have to take an unwanted journey to Bethlehem.

The road was difficult enough. It cut through the heart of Samaria. There was the constant threat that they could be robbed. The terrain was difficult, taking them up and down hills—which we would call mountains in West Texas! Mary was miserable, uncomfortable. They were probably forced to spend most nights sleeping on the ground.

They finally make it Bethlehem, and things are not what they had expected. The Bible says very simply, “She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” When we hear the word “inn” we usually think of a commercial inn like a Holiday Inn! We wonder why Joseph did not email ahead and give his credit card for a confirmed late arrival. What kind of husband was he?

The word used by Luke translated “inn” was not the word used for a commercial type inn for the public. The Greek word used is “kataluma” which means “guest room”. This changes the whole picture. Apparently Joseph had sent word to family or friends in Bethlehem that they were on their way. They arrived late at the home of the host. Other family and friends were also forced to come to Bethlehem that night and had already settled in the guest room for the night.

To understand what happened that night we need to picture a typical peasant home in Israel in New Testament times. There was one large family room where meals were prepared and where the family slept. Adjoining this room would be the “kataluma” or “inn” which was a room for guests. Older children

slept in this room when no guests were present. This room sometimes was built on the roof as a second story. At a lower level next to the family room was the stable. Each night the family animals—donkeys and cattle and sheep—were brought into the stable for safe keeping and to provide warmth in the house. Mangers were placed in the family room near the stable so that if the animals needed something to eat during the night, they could stick their head over and get a snack. It kept them from making noise ordering room service and disturbing everyone's sleep.

When Mary and Joseph arrive at their host home in Bethlehem, they are told that the guest room is full. The host however invites them to stay in the family room, and they will clean out one of the mangers and line it with fresh straw for a crib. Again it is not exactly what Mary had planned—to give birth to her baby in someone's house, but it is not quiet the outdoor stable most of us picture in our minds. And there is no rude inn keeper who sends them out in the cold.

When the child is two years old, Joseph and Mary will have another unwanted journey. When King Herod learned from the wise men that a King of the Jews had been born, he decided to eliminate this heir to the throne that was not of his family. So he ordered all the children less than two years of age in the vicinity of Bethlehem to be killed. An angel told Joseph to flee with the child to Egypt. They would be forced to live in a foreign country for several years until Herod died.

The story of Mary and Joseph is full of unwanted journeys. Sometimes we are forced to take unwanted journeys. We receive a pink slip at work and take the unwanted journey of unemployment. We receive the diagnosis of cancer and take the unwanted journey of chemotherapy, surgery and radiation. We discover our child is an alcohol or drug addict, and we take the unwanted journey of tough love, rehab and recovery. What unwanted journey has your life taken? Those journeys take us down roads of disappointment and overwhelming sorrow and intense pain.

The good news of Christmas is that God not only walks with us on those journeys; God's power is great enough to redeem them and work them for good in our lives. Even though Mary and Joseph took some unwanted journeys, God was working to use those journeys to redeem the world. God uses every circumstance, even the oppression and abuse of a tax-craved Caesar, to accomplish his purposes. With God unwanted journeys do not define our story. He takes our detours and gives them purpose. He does not cause these unwanted journeys.

Christmas is about hope. Hope is a decision we make--a choice to believe that God can take the adversity, disappointment, heartache, and pain of our journeys and use them to accomplish his purposes. God does not abandon us while we are on these journeys. When we look back we discover that these unwanted journeys were the moments when we experienced God's presence and grace most deeply in our lives. God's greatest work in our lives often arises out of the journeys we don't want to take.

The Apostle Paul wrote these words to Christians who were experiencing the oppression of Rome: "...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Romans 5:3-4)

The song, "Bless this Broken Road" captures how God uses our unwanted journeys to lead us into deeper experiences of his love and grace. As the song is played, our youth are going to do a painting that reveals God's presence on our unwanted journeys.

Following the song, members of our healing prayer team will be available at the altar to pray with you. You may be on an unwanted journey right now and would like prayer for the journey. You may have a loved one or friend who is on an unwanted journey. We invite you to come and pray for them. You may want to give thanks for the way God has used an unwanted journey to accomplish his purposes in you life.

Song: "God Bless the Broken Road"

Healing Prayer time to follow as congregation stands to sing HOI