

“We Are Going to Make It, Mary!”

Luke 2:1-7

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Some ideas and insights from Adam Hamilton’s book, *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem* (2011)

We lit the second candle in our Advent wreath, the candle of peace. This light reminds us that Jesus is the prince of peace. Peace in Hebrew is *shalom*. Shalom means “whole” and “completeness”. Shalom doesn’t only mean peace between two entities like two countries or among people, but it also contains a reality and hope for the wholeness for the individual. It can refer to the wellbeing, safety and welfare of an individual or group. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight. In other words, shalom is the way things ought to be. One Sunday, I taught you a Korean greeting, “Ahn-Nyoung-Ha-Se-Yo!” which literally means “Are you in peace?” Not every Korean knows where this greeting originated. The Korean Peninsula is located between two strong nations, China and Japan or Russia and Japan. Throughout history, the Korean peninsula has experienced numerous times of outsiders’ invasions. Believe or not, Korean people had a habit to check one another for their safety every time they met. “Are you in peace” encapsulated the meaning, “Were you safe last night?”

For this year’s Advent, we have been following the footsteps of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Last Sunday, we explored Mary’s hope and faith in God even though she would be challenged to bear a child of God. We can easily imagine her confusion, fear and anxiety. I would say that it must have been hard to find *shalom* in her heart. Now, what is worse, Mary and Joseph had to travel to the town of Bethlehem because they were told to be registered at the husband’s hometown. How could they continue their journey in faith? Where could they find peace in the middle of all challenges and hardships? This morning, I want to talk about Mary and Joseph’s peace in their rough journey.

I want to give you a brief sketch of Mary and Joseph’s travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We usually assume that Mary and Joseph grew up and lived in Nazareth, but Joseph’s hometown was most likely Bethlehem which is around eighty miles south. Since Joseph lived in Bethlehem, we guess Mary’s engagement was most likely a long-distance arrangement made by their families in both towns. Bethlehem was six miles away from Jerusalem and the name of the city means, “House of Bread.” Mary was told that she would be pregnant by the Holy Spirit in Nazareth and she *was* pregnant there. But Joseph didn’t know

exactly what happened to her. It was no surprise that there was no instant connection at that time like emails or cell phones. After Mary was pregnant, she traveled down to visit her cousin Elizabeth in Ein Karem and stayed there for three months. Ein Karem was near Bethlehem just 4 miles away. Joseph probably would have met Mary there and heard of Mary's pregnancy at Elizabeth's house.

Can we imagine Joseph's broken heart when he heard that she was pregnant with someone else's baby? Can you imagine his despair, anger and tragic broken heart? Maybe it must be the horrible and worst day ever in his life. On his way back home to Bethlehem, he must have felt a moment that everything he was building and dreaming all of a sudden collapsed in front of his face.

Joseph must have been deeply hurt by Mary. On one night, the angel Gabriel, God's messenger appeared to Joseph in a dream and said that his fiancé Mary would conceive and bear a son. Joseph was told to name his son as "Emmanuel" which means 'God is with us.' After he heard this news, he hurriedly went back to Ein Karem and met Mary there again. They decided to go back to Nazareth for a wedding ceremony. Now, Mary and Joseph were back in Nazareth for their wedding and a new life expecting a baby soon. In the last month of Mary's pregnancy, Roman soldiers came to Nazareth to announce that emperor had commanded a census that every Jewish family must return to the husband's hometown to be counted. What do you think Mary was feeling as Joseph explained that though she was nine months pregnant, they both would have to make the ten-day journey to Bethlehem. I am sure that Mary and Joseph would have asked and complained to God, questioning, "Why God?", "Why is this happening to us?"

Have you ever felt this way toward God? Have you ever found yourself so profoundly disappointed that all you could do was cry out in anger to God, or weep or both? Sometimes, we experience things when life doesn't go with our expectations, wishes and hopes. We feel frustrated and easily down in despair. It is hard for us to see ourselves and our life circumstances from God's perspective and God's purpose because we are not a master of our life, but we know that God loves us and God is with us. Emmanuel is the name of Christ and God's promise for us. Mary and Joseph obeyed God and put their trust in Emmanuel in spite of hardships and challenges in their life journey. And God was with them. I imagine that especially for Mary, the trip to Bethlehem would have been the most difficult and uncomfortable journey. But Joseph must have assured Mary, "we'll be going to Bethlehem. We're going to make it. You'll be fine, Mary."

Peace comes from absolute trust in God. Blaise Pascal says, in his book *Pensees*, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ.” Shalom comes to us when we have hope that God is with us and within us. God is coming to us as Shalom and calls us to be people of shalom. The Shalom bringers spread a sense of warmth, comfort, hope and well-being even before a word is spoken. They do not talk about religion all the time. They are not constantly telling us to cheer up and look on the bright side. They may not say anything special at all, but when we are with them we feel understood, accepted and welcomed. (From *Forgiveness, the Passionate Journey* by Flora Slosson Wuellner) Then we will be the children of God.

Do you remember Mary Stevenson’s poem about footprint in the sand? This is one of my favorite stories which inspires me and reminds me of God’s abundant love in my life. The story goes like this: One night, in a dream, a person is walking on a beach with God. They leave two sets of footprints in the sand behind them. Looking back, the tracks seem to represent various stages of this person's life. At some point along the way the two trails dwindle to one, especially at the lowest and most hopeless moments of that person’s life. When questioning God, believing that God must have abandoned his follower during those times, God gives the explanation: 'During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you'. In this beautiful season of Advent, I pray that we remember this promise in your hearts. The birth of Jesus is God’s assurance that God is with us, so do not feel afraid. Be strong and be bold because God will be with you. Amen.