

“No place available for a baby”

Luke 2:1-7

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We have been on a special journey this advent season, following Mary and Joseph’s footsteps from Nazareth to Bethlehem. In Nazareth, Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she would bear the Messiah, the son of God. When she was pregnant, she visited her cousin, Elizabeth, in Ein Karem and stayed there for a while receiving great support from her. We have seen that Mary was confused and scared at first, but she kept strong faith in God. Joseph would have visited Mary at Elizabeth’s house (in Ein Karem (4miles away)) and heard about her pregnancy while Mary stayed at her house for three months. Joseph’s heart must have been wounded and deeply hurt on the way back to Bethlehem. Then, as we know, the angel, Gabriel appeared in his dream and explained to him what has happened. Now he realized that God had a great plan for them. He hurriedly went back to Ein Karem and met Mary there again. They decided to go back to Nazareth for their marriage and wedding ceremony. Now, Mary and Joseph were back in Nazareth for their wedding and their new life while expecting a baby soon. By this time, Mary may have been about at least five months pregnant on the day she was married. (3 months at Elizabeth’s house, the trip to Ein Karem back and forth around another month and a couple of months for wedding preparation). This morning, we will see Mary and Joseph’s final trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the story of the birth of Jesus.

Mary and Joseph almost settled into a new life in Nazareth during the final trimester of Mary pregnancy. We can guess that Joseph may have been working in Sepphoris as a carpenter while Mary stayed in Nazareth to prepare for the day her child would be born. She must have been anxiously and excitedly awaiting the new baby’s arrival to them. I remember when I decorated Jacob’s room and hung a ‘welcome sign’ on the wall while we were anxiously waiting for his arrival to us. I guess that Mary’s heart must have been the same as ours. Now, Mary’s due day was coming up. Delivery is a pretty big deal to the parents. Honestly, I didn’t understand why people named the “delivery unit” as the “labor and delivery unit” until my wife had to wait and work for fourteen hours (we did try natural delivery, vacuum and c-section surgery) during her contractions on Thanksgiving night last year. When our baby arrived to us from a long waiting and a lot of working on that overnight, I fully understood why we call it “labor and delivery unit.”

In the last month of Mary's pregnancy, Roman soldiers came in Nazareth to announce that the 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 through she was nine months pregnant, they both would have to make the ten-day journey to Bethlehem? Mary didn't know any one in Bethlehem except Joseph's family. As a woman, having her baby so far from home must have been an uncomfortable and an anxious situation. I can understand Mary's situation. When my wife was in the last trimester of her pregnancy last year, she deeply missed her family and her loved ones in Korea, right before she delivered baby Jacob. She was physically, and emotionally anxious and strangely alone a while before and after the baby's arrival. (Delivery is a blessing, but on the other hand, it is a quite hard one, one I couldn't imagine before we had our baby). In Mary's case, she was forced to travel down to Bethlehem, which is 80 miles away and through three mountains with her pregnant body. This was a big challenge to a pregnant woman. I am sure that Mary would have asked and complained God, questioning, "Why God?" and asking "Why is this happening to me?"

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 that life doesn't go with our 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 the master of our life, but we know that God loves us, and we can have hope that God is preparing a better and bigger plan through us. I heard a story about a water bearer in India:

A water bearer in India had two large pots. One hung on each end of a pole which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it. While the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to her master's house. The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, but the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own disappointing and miserable outcome. After two years, the cracked pot, perceived to be a bitter failure, spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream: "I am ashamed of myself. I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side." The water bearer said, "As we return to the master's house, 'Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my mistress's table.'"

In our story, Mary couldn't understand the deeper meaning of her travels to Bethlehem, but we know that God was using her and the emperor's command to serve God's own saving purposes. The Son of God would be born in Bethlehem where there was a prophecy that the Son of God, the New Messiah, would be born in the town of the great King David, who will save people from their sins and serve people with the love of God as a humble servant.

Finally, Joseph and Mary reached Bethlehem after a nine or ten days long trip through mountains in Samaria. In our Scripture reading, Mary had to deliver a baby in a stable because there was no available room in the inn. But when I researched this story, I found that "the inn" in the Bible has been mistranslated from a Greek word "guest room." It makes sense to us, because Bethlehem is Joseph's hometown. In Jesus' time of Bethlehem, when there were guests, the children usually slept with the parents or in the main living space. There was also a stable or a small barn-think of a garage- that was either behind the home or beneath the home. So if there were many siblings staying together like during the time of the census, there might be no available room for Joseph's family. Another theory is that Joseph's parents intentionally set up a room in the stable where Mary could give birth. (Leviticus 12:1-7 notes that when a woman gives birth to a son, she becomes unclean until her child is circumcised on the eighth day after he is born.) So we can guess that the barn or stable was a perfectly private space for Mary and Joseph, especially for the baby's delivery. And in the end, when her contractions got closer and closer together, she gave a birth a precious baby, Jesus.

Most of all, I believe that the stable is the most important thing in this entire story of the birth of Jesus. Where the baby Jesus was born was not a luxurious place that everyone envied, but the most humble place that everyone couldn't imagine. The core of baby Jesus' story is not in the process of understanding how God could come to us in a miraculous way, but to help us to understand how come God came to us as a baby, the most vulnerable one among us and in the most humble place of our world. We know the answer well: God sent his son to the world, not because he wanted to be served, but because he wanted to serve and save people from their sins. Our baby Jesus will be coming to us again this week on Christmas day, but we should remember this: what Christmas is all about is "giving" and "serving": God has given us his only son and we are called to "serve" others as God did for us. After I had a baby Jacob, he changed my life. I hope that our new baby Jesus can change our lives and perspectives helping us to "give" and "serve" our neighbors and people in need in our world.