

Sermon Series Week 4: *The Journey... to Bethlehem December 20, 2015*

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped Him in a blanket and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. Luke 2:1-7 *The Message translation*

This is the last Sunday in Advent, and I am sorry to see this lovely, quiet season go. I love coming here every Sunday and seeing the candles lit, and singing the songs, and hearing the story of God's plan to become one of us, to be born as we are, and live our life, and die our death, and redeem our humanity. Advent is an experience, that takes us to a deeper place than "happy holidays," and it asks us to travel the road to Bethlehem to find the Baby who lay in a manger.

Every week in Advent we've traveled with someone in God's outrageous plan... some innocent bystander who was dragged off the street and given a role in God's impossible idea to take on our humanity. Do you remember the first Sunday of Advent I quoted Madeleine L'Engle: "To be a Christian is to believe the impossible"? All the characters in God's drama... all the carved olivewood pieces in the crèche... were asked to travel the road to Bethlehem (literally or figuratively) and to believe the impossible.

Last night I walked the road to Bethlehem. Before we went into [what I know is] Fellowship Hall I said to my family - but also to myself a kind of breath-prayer - "Suspend disbelief." Our tour guide led us into another world where the night sky was almost close enough to touch. That first impression of the closeness of the sky told me that this was not the world I live in. Everyone we met told us a piece of God's story, and it became almost like a giant jigsaw puzzle to piece together... all that happened leading us to the stable in Bethlehem.

This is what I took away from Bethlehem Experience and it's my hope and prayer for us as followers of that Baby, of that God who so loved the world (that is all of us, no exceptions) that God become one of us: It's that we are God's story. We are like Mary, and Joseph, and Elizabeth, and the shepherds, and the wise men... we have also been dragged into God's story. Someone has told us about the Child born in Bethlehem and we - perhaps unknowingly - became part of God's story. These were ordinary people who became part of God's story. That is an invitation, and welcome news to us, because most of us [and I should only speak for myself] but most of us are stunningly ordinary. What we've learned as we've traveled the road to Bethlehem is that God uses whoever is here.

I've asked Michael Geringer if we couldn't leave up the night sky in Fellowship Hall because I love its closeness and beauty. It was a symbol for me last night of the closeness and beauty of God. The unfamiliar world my extended family and I traveled into last night was rich and beautiful. I knew Randall Husch was the Roman guard but his fierce unfriendliness asked me to suspend what I know... and enter into the story. And so at every booth in Bethlehem I heard a little more about the world Jesus was

born into; I experienced more of His story. Lindsey Logan led us in a song and the words that captured me were, “all Israel wails for the day.” First century Jerusalem, I realized, wasn’t so different from 21st century culture... we still ache for the redemption of humanity, for peace, for justice, for hope, that for all the world will be healed and transformed by God’s love.

Ginny Leavitt and Corbin Maxwell baked bread together in a little stall in the Bethlehem marketplace and I heard some of God’s story there. At their booth I realized that even when they take off their costumes they’re still a part of God’s story, still carrying the story within themselves. It happened over and over as people, ordinary people whom I know, took on the story and told it as their own. Because... it is our story. This is the message of Bethlehem Experience: we are God’s living story. How do we tell it with conviction and drama and human interest... without the sets and the costumes and Humphrey? That’s the challenge, my friends. This is an old story, as far back as anyone at any time can remember.... that God so loved the world and so longed for the world to hear and see and experience God’s love... that God was born into the human family. No longer a God who communicated with the world through priests and prophets, God wore our flesh, and spoke to us as one of us. God used simple people to tell the Christmas story. God still uses ordinary people to give life to God’s story.

I love the interactive aspect of Bethlehem Experience. The sights and smells, the crabby voice of the census-taker, the greedy leer of the money changer, the liberation-song of the teenage girls on the street, the rough cloth used to bind newborn babies, the young mother who tucked the baby in the manger... all of this invited us to experience Bethlehem. But when Bethlehem is put back in the storage pods in the back parking lot.... how will we continue to experience Bethlehem, continue to live as if God’s story is still happening here and now?

I think we need to discern who we are in God’s story. Are you the potter, who etches a star, as a hidden message of hope and longing, into each pot she creates? Are you the tour guide, who witnesses to all that happened, that brought life to God’s plan? Are you the inn keeper who turned away the young mother and father of the Christ Child because... you didn’t bother to listen to their story, to see behind their circumstances, to give a little more than was expected? Are you the rabbi who models and teaches the young to look and listen and be aware of the coming of the Messiah?

Who are you in the telling of God’s story? How will God use you to continue to tell God’s story... to give life to God’s story? There are more people in the background of the Bethlehem Experience than in the marketplace. Some of us help with costumes (my niece said, “I didn’t know I was gonna get to wear a costume!”) Some of us exchange current-currency for first-century currency. Some of us play carols on the oboe. Some of us bring pizza. Some of us invite friends. Not all of us in the cast of characters in God’s story have lines to memorize. But we are all part of the Bethlehem Experience. We are all a crucial part of the telling and retelling of God’s story. We tell God’s story best when we ourselves have experienced it: God’s love born into our hearts (not just once but again and again and again); our fears and hatred healed by God love; our self-image and self-understanding restored through knowing and believing and experiencing that we are beloved children of God.

Last night, at the end of the Bethlehem Experience, we sang “Silent Night.” I was reminded that music is a spiritual tool God uses, to inform us of truths too deep for

words. Everyone in our group sang. And then we turned around to talk to Humphrey. Humphrey is an important part of the Bethlehem Experience. My children and my nieces and their children all took “selfies” with Humphrey. They stroked his head and saw his bizarre and ancient-looking body sway at their touch, and they all marveled at him. Humphrey is a 2,100 pound reminder of the mystery of God.

All of our words are not adequate to tell God’s story. There is awe and wonder, there is mystery beyond human understanding, in the Bethlehem Experience. This is best expressed (especially for those who don’t know the story) in silence, in generosity, in compassion, in forgiveness, and in undeserved love.

Who are you in the Bethlehem Experience, in the telling of God’s story? God has a part for you. You might not have a costume to wear or lines to memorize. You might be Elizabeth who was Mary’s soul-friend but who isn’t seen in the crèche or celebrated in the Christmas story but who gave Mary strength to take the journey to Bethlehem. You might be a shepherd who saw and heard angels fill the sky and who ran to the manger to see if it was a dream or if there really was a Messiah wrapped in “swaddling cloth and lying in a manger.” One of the ways we discover and discern our part in God’s story is to be part of the church... to experience God’s love and healing and mercy through each other.

What I know for sure on this last Sunday of Advent, before we return here on Christmas Eve to sing to the Baby in the manger, to marvel at the beauty of God’s creative love... what I know for sure is that we can’t tell God’s story without you. We are the Bethlehem Experience. Praise be to God! Amen.