

Luke 2:1-20

“How Will We Get to Bethlehem?”

By Rev. Mat Taylor

Many of us gather here tonight weary from travel. We have boarded planes and ridden in packed cars, and suffered inclement weather. Many others of us have welcomed travelers into our homes. We have picked loved ones and friends up from the airport. We have readied the guest room and cooked meals for these hungry travelers.

The challenge we face on Christmas Eve is to put behind us all the preparations, all the cooking and decorating and shopping, not to mention the traveling, and now muster the energy to journey on to Bethlehem.

Tonight, at least for this solemn time, we gather not for merry-making and eating and drinking and fellowship, but to worship and to find that little child in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Ancient Bethlehem may seem much removed from us. It seems almost like a Neverland of sorts, a place of wonder and mystery, a where the sky is illumined by wondering stars and populated by angels. A place where humble shepherds and wise magi congregate in a little stable to worship a little baby who is tenderly wrapped in bands of cloth by his mother and laid to sleep on a bed of hay in a stone feeding trough.

How could we ever travel to such a place and time? Our skies have no wandering stars or angelic host. I know not one shepherd. Nor, do I know any Persian astrologers. How can we journey to Bethlehem tonight, to see the child for ourselves and worship the birth of our Lord?

In the stories of the birth of Christ given to us by Luke and Matthew, we find many fellow travelers. First, there is Mary and Joseph, of course. They journey to Bethlehem in the ordinary business of life. They travel to be registered in a census. They travel because they must; they have no choice. It is their duty to travel.

The KJV reads that “a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed” and that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem to be “taxed.” While it’s not technically a good translation of the Greek, it gets right to the heart of the matter. Governments count and tabulate the inhabitants of the land largely for the purpose of taxation and the creation of revenue.

Joseph and Mary travel not to worship in the temple or visit with relatives or go to their 10th high school reunion, but to be counted and taxed. What a hardship it must have been, an eighty mile journey! Mary is late in her pregnancy, and little Bethlehem is crowded, and there is only room for them in a stable.

But Mary and Joseph are not the only travelers. Matthew tells us of magi. They are seekers, men of knowledge and insight. They are students of history, learned men who immerse themselves in ancient scrolls. They study the stars, and they divine the time and manner of the king's birth.

Finally we have a handful of shepherds out watching their fields, oblivious to the wonder of this birth, until the sky itself is filled with angels who proclaim the good news. They run into the town for themselves and see the sights and are dumbstruck with fear and awe.

For all these roads have brought these motley travelers to the wonder of Bethlehem!

Tonight, some of us come here as seekers. We have spent many of our years of study and scholarship.

But not all will come by the road of research, historical investigation, and philosophical inquiry. Most of us come in the midst of the business of life. We find ourselves here, much like Mary and Joseph, almost by accident. But the road has brought us here anyway, and we may be surprised to now find God speaking to us.

Some, perhaps a few, come tonight because of a dramatic and surprising experience of God's presence. You have come tonight because God has claimed you in a new way. You come here tonight in the midst of tragedy or triumph, sickness or restored health. You come here tonight because the vale of ordinary existence has been pierced by the unmistakable presence of God.

All these roads, from the mundane to the tragic to the glorious, bring us all tonight to Bethlehem.

And what strange and wonderful thing we find in Bethlehem, but a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid to sleep in a manger.

This infant king is found not a golden crib in a great palace, but is found in a stable and laid on a bed of hay in a feeding trough.

There could be no more perfect place for the infant Christ to sleep, for this little child will grow up to give his life as the spiritual food for the world. Here at this table, we find our savior. He is the bread of life and the fount of our salvation.

Come, let us worship the Christ Child here tonight. Let us gather at this table and feast upon the bread of mercy and the cup of salvation. Let us fill our weary souls with the peace and grace of Christ. Here tonight, at our Lord's table, we finish our journey to Bethlehem!

Amen.