

December 13, 2009

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Journey Toward the Light
“The Journey of Mary: Courage”
Luke 1.26-38, 2.1-7

Today is the third Sunday of the Advent season as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ and prepare for God to break into our lives in new ways. Our theme this Advent is “Journey Toward the Light.”

We are journeying this Advent with some of the characters in the Christmas story to see if their journey toward the light might inform our journey...to see if their story might in some way shine light into our stories.

Our goal is to remove the characters in the Christmas story from the sweet, sentimental, sanitized Hallmark Christmas card version and use our imaginations to make them more real, accessible, human.

Today I want to invite us to use our imaginations to think about the journey of Mary. God chose Mary...this ordinary, poor, young, unimportant girl, in her culture and time, a non-person even...this is who God chose to bear the incarnation of God’s love...the great mystery is this is who God chose to be the bearer of Hope.

God comes in the most unlikely places, in the most unlikely ways and through the most unlikely people. How might God be seeking to show up and shine through your life and your journey?

I love to think of the courage of Mary...no doubt trembling with fear but willing to trust.

Today I want to do something a little different. I’m going to invite you to close your eyes as I lead you on a guided visualization. It’s

dangerous for a preacher to invite you to close your eyes. If you fall asleep I will assume that's what your soul needed this morning. I want us to travel with Mary as she makes the long, difficult journey to Bethlehem.

You don't have to close your eyes but if you feel comfortable closing your eyes it might help shut out distractions. If you get distracted as we travel, that's okay, don't worry about it, simply return to my voice and the images I am awakening.

Focus on your breathing for a moment. Don't try to breathe any differently. Simply focus on your own natural breath and be present in this moment.

Listen to my voice as I invite you to use your imagination to travel with me to join Mary in Nazareth. Mary is long considered to be the perfect image of the human soul.

Mary...young...possibly 13 or 14...innocent, alive, trusting, open. Try to see Mary as clearly as you can standing by the village well, dressed in the clothing of the time...a long, embroidered dress, a veil covering her head.

Mary is standing at that well still shaken as she is thinking back to the strange appearance of the angel telling her not to be afraid, sharing the unbelievable news that the power of the Highest is to overshadow her and that she is to bear a child.

She was so scared. She still is. This is something you can't get your mind around. There is so much she doesn't understand. Why would God choose her? She can't believe that God would choose her? What could it possibly mean that God chose her? She's a nobody.

She stands at that well remembering her own words in reply to the angel. Even though she didn't understand what was taking place, she dared to trust and found herself taking a deep breath and saying, 'Here am I...let what you have said be done to me.'

Can you imagine the courage of this young girl? Courage isn't the absence of fear. It is the willingness to trust, to act, to take that leap of faith, to take that step on your journey, in spite of your fears. Mary knew the people of Nazareth wouldn't understand. She didn't understand.

Enter the scene with me around that well. See the village gossips standing near the corner of the synagogue. Pointing at Mary whispering among themselves. Mary can feel their stares. She knows what they are whispering because she has heard it already, "Look at her...pregnant...how scandalous...poor Joseph...he doesn't deserve this...and her parents...how shameful."

Even Joseph doubted her. Can you feel Mary's pain of being doubted, judged, criticized...even by those closest to her? They judge. They think they know but they really don't know at all what Mary is going through.

Have you ever felt misunderstood, criticized, judged? How can Mary withstand this? How can she find the courage to make this journey?

Go with Mary to her small dwelling place. It's a simple, tiny place with a dirt floor. There are a few furnishings and a straw pallet for a bed. Even the poorest today have more.

She prepares a simple meal...placing small loaves to bake on an open fire. Joseph arrives.

His face is troubled as he arrives, and Mary senses that something is wrong. Joseph says, ‘There’s an edict from the Emperor. Every one must go to their own birthplace for an imperial census.’”

You know what this means? We have 75 miles to travel to get to Bethlehem, and with you about to bear a child. Joseph says, “How can we do it? I don’t see how we can possibly do it?”

My guess is you know what it’s like to wonder how you can possibly make the journey you know you must make. Mary and Joseph make their plans. The donkey that usually carries the carpenter’s heavy beams will carry Mary. They gather some food for their journey. They plan to bring some blankets for the cold nights along the road.

Bright and early they start out. The sky is overcast. There is a cold, biting wind blowing into their faces on this morning. They trudge the dusty road hour after hour, hour after hour. They pause at noontime by a ravine and eat some cheese and dry bread and then go on.

There’s rain and the dust turns to mud. Evening and darkness are coming when they find a mill and knock on the door. They are wet, chilled and bone tired...Mary, only a few days from childbirth. The miller lets them in and they sleep on bags of grain in a corner of the old mill. Outside the wind howls and the rain beats against the roof. They have a fitful night’s sleep. Those fearful thoughts that often come at 3 in the morning take hold of Mary and refuse to go away until she drifts to sleep from sheer exhaustion.

During the night the rain stops, and the next day they go on for another 30 miles under broken clouds. They meet others traveling from their homes who barely nod. Have you noticed how your own journey can be so consuming that you fail to notice others along the way?

Hour by hour Mary and Joseph go on. They stop at noon for a short rest and then go on again.

The journey is long and difficult. It is so hard to see what lies ahead. What does it all mean? There are moments when fear takes hold. But somehow they muster up the courage to keep going. This night an old villager and his wife let them sleep in a corner of their hut. It is good, they say, to welcome strangers. One may entertain God in doing so.

Another long day ahead...and just when they begin to wonder whether they will make it, they see in the distance Bethlehem ...their destination.

They had enough money for the Inn. They had taken all their savings just for this...with the time of birth so near. In hope and expectation, Joseph knocks on the great door of the Inn. The Innkeeper opens the door. He is a hulk of a man larger than lifesize, framed by the light of a fire blazing on the hearth. "Sorry, no room. No, not even a corner. No, I don't know what you will do."

The heavy door clangs shut, and the dark night is even more penetrating. Joseph stumbles down a little hill. The time is very close. There is a cave in the hillside with a shelter built in front of it...some straw in the back. Standing in the shadows a donkey and some oxen...the dung is thick on the dirt floor of the cave with steam rising in the cold night air.

The manger...the animal's feeding trough gleams with the saliva of the oxen that have eaten there. Not a likely place for the birth of Christ, the birth of love and hope and possibility, but perhaps the less likely the better. Then none of us can say that our lives are a less probable place.

A runaway child sleeps on a pile of straw at the very back, a frightened child who has run away from the beatings of a stepfather...the stable turns no one away.

Mary goes into labor. This exhausted, impoverished, frightened child, miles away from home, endures the most terrifying, mysterious, painful experience a woman may know...and into that dark place, that lonely place, the child is born...God's love enters the world.

It was dirty. It was dark. It smelled. It is the very indignity of this story that makes it so beautiful and compelling. Could it mean that our own indignity...our own dark places...our own pain...our own fear can be transformed into something holy and beautiful. Mary picks up this child and she starts to cry. Joseph tries to comfort her. She tells him she wants her mother. She wants to go home.

Then, wiping the tears from her eyes, she says she's sorry. Joseph says, "That's okay" and he means it. They hold each other. They cry together.

Mary and Joseph hurt all over from their journey. There is nothing to eat. It is cold. They are scared and feel all alone. Yet, the promise in this story...the promise Mary had the courage to trust when she said, "Here am I, Let it be done according to your word" is the promise that God was there, right there.

As they were holding this child of promise, God was holding them...holding them with a love that will never let them go. A light pierced the darkness – God's love comes in the most unlikely places, in the most unlikely ways – through the most unlikely people.

How might God's love be seeking to show up and shine through your life and your journey? Wherever you are on your journey, may that light break in giving you the courage to keep going, to trust.