

I called an old school friend and asked what he was doing. He replied that he was working on “Aqua thermal treatment of ceramics, aluminum and steel under a constrained environment.” Well, I was duly impressed.

Upon further inquiry, I learned that he was washing dishes with hot water ...
under his wife’s supervision.

Today we’re headed from Nazareth to Bethlehem, but how did we get here? A brief review - Last week Mary was with Elizabeth, and Mary exclaimed, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!” Such wonderful joy in those words as Diane proclaimed last Sunday. Sometimes, I just want to sit with joy for a long time.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, until Elizabeth delivered her son who was to become John the Baptist. Somewhere in those three months’ time Joseph went to see Mary at Elizabeth’s home, a few miles from his home. He had had his dream where the angel of the Lord said to him, “Joseph Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Instead of dismissing her, Joseph goes to see Mary to tell her that he’ll stand by her and marry her.

After Elizabeth delivers her son, Mary and Joseph head back to Nazareth to prepare for their wedding. Wedding preparations can be such an anxiety producing time. Joseph is getting to know his in-laws. Don’t you wonder what they thought

of him? Mary and Joseph hastily make their wedding plans. Together they anxiously wait for the birth of their child. Are Mary and Joseph happy?

Our journey actually starts in Rome where Caesar Augustus, the first Emperor of the Roman Empire issues a mandatory census. As that news reaches Palestine it would have been delivered to all the towns and villages. And this decree causes an uproar in Mary's home. This was not what anyone expected!

Detour story – At my previous parish in Illinois, one morning I was driving into St. Louis and planned to take the scenic route. I went down a small two-lane country road, farmland on either side. I enjoyed the woods that hugged the various creeks and separated the one plot of land from another. It was beautiful and I was going at a slower pace taking it all in. It was a summer morning. The fields were full of corn and soybeans. I've always enjoyed the beauty of the crops in the fields.

I was relaxed until I saw a *Detour* sign. One detour led to another and then to another. The detours turned me around 180 degrees. I was getting exasperated. I was going to a Dr.'s appointment and had given myself plenty of time, before all the detours. I became anxious and began to hurry.

I came to an intersection where, after stopping, another detour sign directed me to turn left. I stopped. It was hard to see around the tall corn. I pulled out and began to turn left, when out of my left eye I saw something coming at me at blinding speed. I hit my brakes in the middle of the intersection while at the same

time this speeding car swerved around me and continued heading in the opposite direction.

My heart stopped. I stayed in the middle of the intersection for a few moments. I looked around and to my surprise it wasn't a four-way stop. I was shaking. I nearly caused an accident!

Detours changed my attitude and expectation of a pleasant drive that morning. Unwanted journeys tend to take us off the familiar route we know and come to trust and away from our joy. I was given a decree of detours that day, uncharted territory I did not want to go through.

What kind of detours or unwanted journeys have you taken in your life? Where did they lead you?

Trip to Nazareth – Mary is forced, by the Roman decree, to make another journey, this time from Nazareth to Bethlehem with her new husband Joseph to be counted in the census. And it's not what Mary was expecting! **A gigantic detour in her life!** She was nine months pregnant. She was in her hometown. Her parents were there. Most likely she had a midwife to help her deliver her child. Now, Rome was demanding she and Joseph make an **Unwanted Journey; a Detour** in the midst of her joyful expectations.

How do you think Mary would have reacted? Adam Hamilton begs us to consider that Mary would have been upset. We don't think of Mary being

unhappy at her circumstances, after all, she is carrying the Savior of the world. Realistically, she may have said a few choice words to hubby Joseph as they embark on this ten-day journey, “Why do we have to do this? Why now?”

Unhappy about the Romans intrusion into their new life together?

You bet!

Mad about leaving her parents when she’s about to give birth?

Absolutely!

And her husband, the silent one, remains speechless. **Oh, bother!**

Ancestral Routes - Have you ever in your life driven a road or stretch of highway that your ancestors once drove? It was and is familiar territory. You know the curves, the ups and downs, the danger points, the scenic parts and the long stretches where you can really let it fly. It’s comforting to go over these areas as we remember and stay connected to our roots.

The route that Mary and Joseph took to Bethlehem was a familiar one, traveled for over 1600 hundred years by the Patriarchs of the Bible. **It was in** this central area of Palestine where God appeared to Abraham and promised to give this land to his descendants. **Here** is where Jacob saw angels ascending and descending to and from heaven. **Jacob’s Well is here**, near the town of Sychar.

Mary and Joseph **would have walked** where the great early prophets Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha ministered. **They were retracing God's "salvation history."** And carrying the child in her womb, Mary would bring the crown, the pinnacle of this history into being!

As we consider the ancestral roads we have traveled, where have they taken us? Individually, as a family, as a church, as a country?

This ancestral route likely taken by Mary and Joseph was known as the Way of the Patriarchs. It went right through Samaria. Jews typically wanted nothing to do with the Samaritans, whom they considered unclean and heretics. But Adam Hamilton reminds us that the other likely road to Bethlehem, that Mary and Joseph could have taken, would have added another 2 days travel time. It was along the Jordan River, which went around Samaria. Two more days would be more strain upon Mary's pregnancy. Our ancestral routes may also take us away from the other side of town; the poorest, dirtiest and roughest side.

But this is no easy journey. They traverse desert mountains, hills and valleys, zig-zagging across the central part of Israel. The route would have been a worn dirt path, littered with rocks and pebbles. Robbers roamed these main routes at night as did wild animals. Not a safe place to take your pregnant wife. What was God thinking?

Can you imagine the things Mary might have said to Joseph on this trip? “This is no honeymoon, Joey! You owe me big time.” Or “Why are you going that way?” and “Do you think we’re stopping here?”

Hamilton believes that Mary and Joseph went right through Samaria. Apparently, they had no worries about the Samaritan people. Perhaps, Mary and Joseph raised Jesus where he learned to appreciate and love the Samaritans. We hear it in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan; and again in the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at Jacob’s well. Today, we might wonder who the Samaritans are that we want to avoid and where is the Samaria we do not want to travel through?

Finally, the family reaches Bethlehem. It’s late and dark out and everywhere they go there’s no room for them. Now, we might ask ourselves, if Joseph is from Bethlehem, why can’t he just go home to his parents’ house and be their guest? In the New Testament, we find only two places where the Greek word *kataluma* is used. It is often translated as *inn*, as, “***There was no place for them in the inn.***” The other place where *kataluma* is used is when Jesus asks two of his disciples to find a ***guest room*** for them to eat the Passover meal together. The word *kataluma* in Greek is best translated as ***guest room***. In first century Israel, the *kataluma* is an upper portion of someone’s home where the children slept, but when guests arrive, they are given this space.

Joseph's family home was most likely full of his siblings and their families, to take part in the census too, so the guest room was full by the time Joseph and Mary arrived. In Jewish tradition, a woman who gives birth is unclean until the eighth day when her son is circumcised. Thus, it's very likely Mary was given the stable or animal stall; it was also a part of the house.

This is the birthplace of the Christ Child! A humble, dirty, lowly stable; the end of an unwanted journey. The divine detour God put before Mary and Joseph. In the midst of Mary and Joseph's dream of family life, God is at work to redeem the world.

This was not the last of Mary's unwanted journeys. This is what happens to you and me too. Adam Hamilton writes, "All of us take unwanted journeys, but God always walks with us. God is at work in our unwanted journeys and works to redeem us. That is hope; knowing God is at work in our journeys wherever they lead us; believing that God can take the adversity, the disappointment, the heartache, and the pain of our journeys and use them to accomplish his purposes."

Trust God, as Mary and Joseph did, keeping your faith this Christmas, because the detours in your life are never the end of your story. Amen.