

GO FORWARD!



*this Christmas
with Jesus*

Sermon

Go Forward This Christmas With Jesus

TEXT:

Luke 2:1-20

THEME:

This Christmas Eve as we journey towards Bethlehem, it is worth remembering that we serve a God who fully enters into our life's journey - a God who was literally "born on the road".

INTRODUCTION:

It's Christmas Eve and a desperate woman is pounding her fists against the ticket counter at the Scranton International Airport. In the packed terminal, Kate McCallister raises her voice, on a note between anger and tears, and pleads with the airline agent to find her a flight to Chicago. Bad weather, delays, overbooked flights means that not a single flight can be found. The sympathetic ticket agent looks helplessly at her, as she explains, "I have to get home to Chicago, my son is home alone!"

Suddenly, a tap on the shoulder causes her to turn around. "Excuse me," says a large, but kindly man, dressed in a bright yellow jacket. "I couldn't help notice you got a little dilemma there, and we got a crisis ourselves," he said, pointing to a strange group of men carrying clarinets, tubas, and accordions. "Gus Polinski," he said introducing himself, "Polka King of the Midwest?" waiting for a response of recognition from the woman. Getting none, he went on to explain that because their flight was cancelled, they were renting a van to drive from Philadelphia to Wisconsin, and that if she didn't mind travelling with a few "polka bums", she was welcome to go with them as far as Chicago, thus being reunited with her son, Kevin.

Classic Christmas movies such as, you guessed it, "Home Alone", often relate the holiday season with last minute travel. While everyone else is home on Christmas

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Eve with their families, drinking coco around the fire, or trimming the Christmas tree, there is another group of people who are on the road, figuratively, if not literally, desperately trying to get home for Christmas. Airports, train stations, bus depots, and highway rest stops become connecting points for people who are on the road, using every resource they have to get home. Perhaps you know firsthand what it is like to be driving down a dark interstate highway, on Christmas Eve, asking yourself, "Am I the only person still trying to get home?" Or maybe you can relate to Kevin's mom, finding yourself delayed by circumstances beyond your control. In scripture, rather than Christmas as the idealized family holiday shown in Hollywood movies,

"The characters in the nativity story experienced the first Christmas on the road."

Luke chapter two tells us that in the days of Caesar Augustus, a census throughout the Roman world was ordered, requiring every male head of household to return to his hometown. "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."¹

In the last weeks of Mary's pregnancy, they are faced with the prospect of a long and difficult journey. Tradition has Mary riding on a donkey, (which is uncomfortable enough) though scripture is silent on their mode of transportation. Based on Luke's later description of the Holy Family offering two pigeons for sacrifice when Jesus was presented at the Temple², it is reasonable to assume that Mary and Joseph were impoverished. The Law of Moses said that two pigeons could be offered for sacrifice if a family could not afford a lamb³. It is therefore entirely possible that Mary and Joseph made the long journey by

¹ All scripture references taken from the NIV.

² Luke 2:21-40

³ Leviticus 5:7

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foot, as it would have been very costly to travel with a beast, even, the lowly donkey.

Imagine the sheer discomfort of traversing those long, dusty roads, in the heat, exposed to the elements, competing with scores of other travelers for lodgings and food, and upon arrival, having no accommodation other than a stable. One might think that Mary deserved a little bit of comfort for her faithfulness, but she was afforded none. Her first Christmas was spent on the road.

Consider the shepherds who were living out in the nearby fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. While this evokes a romantic, pastoral image to the modern listener, shepherds were actually a despised group of people. They were known for grazing their sheep on whatever available land they came across which quickly put them at odds with farmers. Living apart from society, they formed their own tight-knit community that was undoubtedly hostile to outsiders. These shepherds were settling in for a long night's watch when God called them on a journey. The angel of the Lord, called the frightened shepherds to leave their flocks behind and travel on the road to Bethlehem, to meet this Savior, who would be found wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Leaving behind everything, they set out toward Bethlehem, "To see this thing which has come to pass." For the shepherds, their first Christmas was spent, on the road.

And consider the magi: "wise men" from the east, astrologer-intellectuals from Persia- Arabia, who on their own volition set out on the road when a strange star appeared in the sky. Matthew 2:1-12 tells us that when they arrived in Jerusalem their first stop was quite logically, Herod's palace. Where else would a royal child be born? Old Herod was disturbed by this, and all Jerusalem with him. For Herod, this announcement represented a bump in his road, the possibility that there was more to life than just his own kingdom. A king was coming whose kingdom was not of this world, and rather than seek out this king to lay his crown at his feet, he used the magi to find him with the hopes of killing him. But happily, what man intended for evil, God used for good. The magi's journey on the road to Bethlehem resulted in gifts being bestowed upon a peasant baby, born in a stable. For the magi, their first Christmas was spent, on the road.

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For all these characters - Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the magi, their roads converged in Bethlehem. The journey to Bethlehem was fraught with many dangers and uncertainties; yet it was a journey truly worth taking, because on that first Christmas,...

“God was born on the road.”

The Christ Child's journey did not just begin with the birth of a baby in a Bethlehem manger; nor did it begin when the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would give birth to a son who would save the people from their sins. The journey began long ago. John tells us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.”⁴ God's journey to Bethlehem began, as John 1:14 says, when “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

God has always journeyed with his people. He walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden⁵; He broke bread with Abraham⁶; He guided the children of Israel through the desert⁷, but in Bethlehem, God did a new thing! A thing more incredible than anything done before: God became flesh and dwelt amongst us.

Theologian R. Allan Culpepper calls this a scandal. He says:

At Bethlehem, we also witness the scandal of the Christmas story. Neither the familiarity nor the season's festivities should prevent us from realizing the scandal that God came into human history completely helpless, as a newborn, and was laid in a feeding trough. Consider in what splendor

⁴ John 1:1-4

⁵ Genesis 3:8

⁶ Genesis 18:1-8

⁷ Exodus 13:21-22

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God might have come, but instead God slipped unobtrusively into a small province far from the seams of earthly power, born to a young couple, unwed or only recently married. No elaborate preparations were made for the birth. **God was born on the road.**⁸

Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the magi all encountered this God born on the road, when they bowed at the feet of the Christ Child. Surely, in that moment they would be in agreement with John, who reflecting on his own relationship with Jesus, said, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."⁹ As a result of this encounter, their lives were changed. The hardened shepherds left rejoicing; the magi turned aside from the road they were on and began a new journey, an act symbolic of repentance, and Mary and Joseph who set out on their journey with many doubts, reflected on the recent events by pondering them in their hearts, accepting in faith that God would overcome all obstacles.

This Christmas Eve you may find yourself literally, on the road, away from friends and family. Or, maybe you're journeying in another sense? Maybe this Christmas Eve you're on the journey of a new relationship? Maybe you're on the journey of a new career, or you're journeying through a new phase in your life? Childbirth, kids going off to school, retirement? Maybe you're beginning a journey of health troubles, or you're stepping out on a journey of loss and grief? The road before you is uncertain. But take heart and know this:

"The God who came to us on the road to Bethlehem wants to journey with us on our road of life."

Jesus spent his life and ministry on the road, calling believers to become disciples. It was on the road that crowds came to him for healing. It was on the road where he preached repentance and forgiveness to the 'whosoever'. It was on the road to Calvary where our sins were blotted out, atoned for by his shed blood. It was on the road to Emmaus where his disciples encountered him,

⁸ New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume IX: Luke, John. Abingdon Press, 1995. p. 67.

⁹ John 1:14b

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risen and alive, yet unknown, until their eyes of faith were opened. It was on the road to Damascus where he revealed himself to Paul, whose life was forever changed because he met the Lord, on the road.

Even today, Jesus wants to walk with you on life's road as Savior, protector, guide, and friend. In just a few days we'll be on a new road, the road of 2017. The General of The Salvation Army has issued a challenge to the entire Salvation Army world called the *Whole World Mobilizing*. His prayer, which is undoubtedly God's will for our movement, is that 2017 would be a year of unprecedented growth and evangelism - that multitudes of people would experience new life in Christ as a result of our faithful witness. To show our commitment to win the world for Jesus, we've committed to, quite literally, stepping out on the road, in a worldwide march of witness. For this corps (or ministry unit), our worldwide march of witness begins the moment we step outside those doors. Our march around the world begins right here in our community. In the upcoming year, we are going to journey with a lot of people: our neighbors, our colleagues, our classmates, the powerful and the powerless. We're going to journey with them on their road and through our faithful witness we will tell them that Jesus is the road that leads to the Father. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.¹⁰ We espouse the truth of the song that says,

*He's the Christ of the human road
And he offers to carry our load.
He is walking our way
Every night, every day
This Christ of the human road
He is human and yet so divine
And he knows your heart's sorrow and mine.
In all kinds of need,
He's a true friend indeed.
This Christ of the human road.¹¹*

¹⁰ John 14:6

¹¹ "Christ of the Human Road" - Gems for Songsters V

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This Christmas Eve our desire is to be home. Home is a place of certainty and refuge, where everything stays the same, where we feel safe. Though that is our desire, it's much more likely that tonight we find ourselves on the road. The road of uncertainty, the road that is constantly changing, the road that is sometimes dangerous. But do not fear. Go forward! Go forward this Christmas with Jesus! Go forward in his power and strength! There are people you will meet 'on the road' that need to hear about the love of God. There are people who walk beside you 'on the road', every day, your friends and neighbors, your family even, who are like the sleeping inhabitants of Bethlehem, unaware that the King of kings and the Lord of lords is within their very gates. They need to be brought to the Babe of Bethlehem; they need to hear his message.

When the priest Simeon met the infant Jesus he prophesied that Mary's own heart would be pierced as with a sword. We understand that to mean a kind of sorrow as Mary would later witness her son dying on the cross, but in another way, when we truly encounter the Gospel, as Simeon encountered the Christ Child, our hearts are pierced with the full love of God, a love that seeks to transform us. This transforming love can be painful as we change our former ways. God's Holy Spirit can feel like a sword, piercing our hearts. But as a result of this, we are remade in Christ's image. So too, the people who journey with us 'on the road' desperately need the message of the Gospel to penetrate their own hearts. Will you afford them that opportunity through your life and witness? Will you journey with them on the road to salvation? Will you go forward in mission?

In a few short days, we will begin a new year with a new focus: The Whole World Mobilizing: Go Forward! Tonight, may we go forward with Jesus! May the road we're on tonight lead us to the holy Christ Child. May we, like the shepherds, fall down at his feet in wonder. May we, like the magi, offer him our adoration and worship. May we, like Mary and Joseph, offer him our obedience as we submit our plans, ambitions, and designs, to the Christ of the human road.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, as we travel this road of life, help us to remember that you journey with us. Whether the next bend in the road leads to joy, fulfillment,

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sadness, or disappointment, we rejoice in the fact that you are beside us. On this Holy Eve of Christmas, may we reflect on the "Good News" first announced by the angels to the lowly shepherds of Bethlehem, a 'Gospel' that will bring great joy to all people. Thank you, Emmanuel, for coming into this world. Continue to guide us as we live out our discipleship calling. May we remind others that you are the only way, that you are the only truth, and that you are the only life, that leads to Heaven. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

RESPONSE: CANDLE LIGHTING

On our journey to Bethlehem and our journey through life, we are grateful for lights to illumine the path. As headlights on a car, or flashlights in our hand, bring safety and security to the lonely traveler, we are reminded tonight of the One who lights our way. On Christmas Eve we celebrate that Jesus is the "Light of the World". We carry his light with us on our journey.

Sin clouds the path before us and it is no secret that the world can be a dark, and scary place. But take comfort, o traveler! With the prophet Isaiah, rejoice and say, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."¹²

We light the Christ Candle symbolizing Immanuel's coming into the world.

(As the Christ Candle is lit, a suitable and contemporary song that could be performed as a solo or sung congregationally is Tim Hughes', "Here I am to Worship". The verse begins with, "Light of the World you stepped down into darkness...")

Jesus told his disciples, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the

¹² Isaiah 9:2 NIV

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same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."¹³

With Christ shining in our hearts, we are sent out as lights in the world, illuminating the darkness, mobilized in mission to invite the entire world to come into the Kingdom of God. As we light our candles from the Christ Candle, remember to shine his light as you journey through life so that others may come and worship Jesus, the God on the Road.

As we light our candles from the Christ Candle, let us stand and sing together the carol, _____.

(Officer/Service Leader lights his/her candle from the Christ Candle. Pass the flame to every person until all candles are lit. If electric candles are used, still perform the act of "lighting" the candle from the Christ Candle, passing the light from person to person.)

SUGGESTED MUSIC FOR CANDLE LIGHTING:

Immanuel
Silent Night

¹⁴CHRISTMAS EVE BLESSING:

Remain standing, and let us read responsively the Christmas Eve Blessing.

1: God comes to us now; comes to embrace us.

All: Emmanuel, God who is with us.

2: *For this Child is Peace beyond all peace,*

¹³ Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁴ written by Lisa Frenz, in ***Christmas Eve: In the Beginning was the Word***, and posted on the **Mount Carmel Lutheran Church** website. If used in worship, include the following note: "Copyright Lisa Frenz. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission."

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All: Love beyond all loves,
Light of light,
Song of songs,
God almighty!

1: Follow this Child who is Grace beyond all grace,

All: A Gift beyond all gifts,
Joy of joys,
God made flesh,
almighty!

2: *Go in joy and love to serve your newborn King!*

All: Thanks be to God! Amen!