

finding... c H r l s t M a s
Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-7
“The Journey of Mary and Joseph”

Introduction

Have you ever noticed throughout the scriptures that those whom God calls are, more often than not, sent on some sort of journey? Think about it for a moment; Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel and the entire nation of Israel, just to name a few. All were sent out into some type of “wilderness” of God’s choosing. They were required to leave behind all that they knew, and with which they were familiar, and sent to places where only God could sustain them. I believe that there is a spiritual truth that we should glean from this. In his famous devotional book, *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby makes a statement that I have always thought to have profound significance. He said, “You cannot stay where you are and go with God.” Sounds simple doesn’t it? But it is actually much deeper than it appears on the surface. In order to “know” God intimately, you must first get to a place in your life where there are few, if any, distractions. Think about the times that you have attempted to have a meaningful prayer time with your Heavenly Father. It seems that every time that I try to get silent before The LORD, the phone rings, an ambulance goes by with its siren blaring, someone knocks on the door, etc. etc. Can I get a witness? (even as I am typing this opening paragraph, I have received four phone calls and a text message!) It truly seems at times that the entire universe is endeavoring to keep me apart from what I need the most; time alone with the God of the universe.

Jesus made it very plain that the only way that we, as sinful people, will EVER find Him is for God The Father to draw us (**John 6:44**). God wants to bring us all to the place where we can hear His voice and not have it drowned out by the cacophony of siren-like distractions from the world around us. Oft times, God even has to take us away from family and friends so that He can speak to us without their “chiming in” with worldly advice, that is contrary to His plan and purpose for us. Everyone who has ever been drawn to follow the savior knows EXACTLY what I’m talking about. There are a lot of well intentioned people out there, who will try and talk you out of following after Christ with all that you have. Sometimes their arguments even sound reasonable, when in fact they are coming straight from the enemy himself. Jesus wants ALL of US (**Luke 14:26**). This is why those he has called in the scriptures were taken out of their “comfort zones”, so they could finally hear His wonderful voice; that still small voice (**1 Kings 19:12**) that holds for us our life’s true purpose. It is the voice that speaks the very “words of life” to our innermost being (**John 6:68**). Don’t be surprised then, when God begins to call you out from this world and take you on a spiritual journey of your own, for it is His heart’s desire that you find Him (not that you serve Him mind you), but FIND HIM. He doesn’t need your help to do His will. He just wants ALL of you. When He has that, the service part will fall right into place, and you will be honored to serve!

This year, as Christmastime is rapidly approaching, I would like to take a few weeks to look at the spiritual journeys that God called each of the now-so-familiar-Bible-characters from the “Christmas Story” to make. We know these people all too well, for their stories have been retold year after year for millennia. But this year I want us to take a look at the JOURNEYS that each of them were called to take, for just like us, they all came from very different places and walks of life, but they were all drawn to the one place where they would all find... HIM. It is the true meaning of the gospel message, that God so loved the world that they would come to find HIM. Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the Magi, were all called to a little town called Bethlehem to find the newborn King. There were multiple sacrifices that each of them had to make in order to kneel in His wonderful presence. But I imagine that they all were forgotten the moment that they looked into His wonderful face! How far would you be willing to go, in order to one day behold the face of Jesus? Joseph and Mary were willing to risk everything to take the journey of faith to which they had been called. It was a journey to do the IMPOSSIBLE. It was INCONVENIENT, but it was also INSPIRATIONAL. Much like the journey to which Christ Himself is calling all of us, to come to know Him more intimately than we could ever imagine. Like Joseph and Mary so many years ago, we too are on a spiritual journey to find... HIM!

The Impossible (Luke 1:26-38)

How does a person know if God has called them to do something? The simplest answer that I can give is this; if you can do it "without" God, then it is not "from" God. Now don't take that wrong, I'm awfully aware that without God, we couldn't even take our next breath. That is not what I am saying, but if God truly calls someone to a task, then there is no way that it can be completed without Him. God chose Mary as a vessel to bring His only begotten Son, the Savior, into the world. There is absolutely no earthly way that she could have done that in her own strength. Apart from a divine miracle and an immaculate conception, she would never by any means be able to just go out there and "give birth" to The Messiah! God sent Gabriel to Mary, to let her know what He was about to do THROUGH her. It was never something that she would have been expected to do on her own. Now I know that there are some people out there who like to credit Mary with some kind of "divine power", but the fact is, she was just an ordinary girl, probably between the ages of 12-14. The only "special" thing about this child was that she was willing to be used by God. She was willing to live by faith, and because of that, she received grace. That is exactly what it meant when the angel said to her, **"you are highly favored" (vs 28)**. The word translated "favored" (*Charito* in the Greek), actually means to be given grace. You see, Mary was able to go on her incredible journey with God, because of the grace that she was given, by faith. Come to think of it, isn't that how all of our journeys began?

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves. it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

Ephesians 2:8-9

Mary started off just like the rest of us. Hearing the message and calling of God, believing it, and being given the grace to follow through with it. God was calling her to do the impossible. In case you haven't heard, virgin births don't come naturally. And delivering a child that is The Son of God? Well, that is even more rare! As I recall, it has only happened ONCE in the history of the world. God was calling Mary to do the impossible, but Mary wasn't going to have to "do it" at all. God would do all the heavy lifting. I love what Mary said to the Angel, **"how can this be...?"**. That's a pretty good question don't you think? I mean, she may have been a naive young teenager, but she did understand basic biology. But Gabriel explained that it would be a miracle of The Holy Spirit that would cause her to conceive a child. After that, Mary asks no more questions. She simply said, **"Let it be unto me as you have said"**. Come to think of it, her Son, Jesus, would pray that same prayer thirty some years later in the Garden of Gethsemane, **"Not my will, but your will be done"**. Faith is trusting God with all the details. God does not call any of us to "do what we can do", but rather, He is calling us to do the impossible, and by that I mean, letting Him do the impossible in us.

What if churches ever really got a hold of this reality? What if we stopped looking at "the budget", or how many volunteers that we had, or what we had been able to do in the past, and instead, started praying and asking God to show us what HE wanted us to do? Do you really think that God has ever been limited by our limitations? He wants to do the miraculous, not the every day "going through the motions" mind you, but the MIRACULOUS. I believe with all my heart that The LORD has a special mission for Freedom Fellowship. I believe that He wants us to change the world for His glory and His kingdom. How are we ever going to be able to accomplish that? We can't. So why don't we start praying in earnest that He will do it through us? So many people think that they can rely on their own talent and ability to make God-sized things happen. They can't. That's why there are so many dead churches in this world. What would happen, if we realized that, like Mary and Joseph, we are just ordinary people willing to place our trust in the hands of an Almighty God? If we can do it, it's not from Him! But, He will enable us to do the impossible, if we are willing to yield ourselves completely over to His might and pray as Mary prayed, **"I AM the LORD'S servant** (the word means slave), **let it be unto me as you have said."**

Wow! Now let the journey begin!

The Inconvenience (Luke 2:1-7)

Good old Caesar, of all times to issue a decree that everyone had to return to the place of their heritage to be counted and pay taxes. You see, it was necessary that Jesus be not only from Nazareth, but also to be born in Bethlehem. It's all about the fulfillment of prophecy. Zechariah said that The Messiah would be called "The Branch" (**Zechariah 3:8**), and Micah said that He would be born in Bethlehem (**Micah 5:2**). The coming of the Messiah had been long foretold by The Old Testament prophets. In fact, there are over 300 prophecies concerning Jesus in The Old Testament, and He fulfilled ALL of them! Pretty impressive, huh? He was very often referred to as "the branch" in the Old Testament, because He was to descend from David's family tree. The word "*Nazareth*" actually comes from the Hebrew word "*Netzer*" meaning, you guessed it, "branch". And as for Bethlehem, well that word actually means "house of bread" (bakery), and Jesus is, well, "The Bread of Life" that came down from Heaven (**John 6:51**). How fitting that the One called The Bread of Life would be born in a place called "the bakery". You see, our God is all about the details, my friends. He is meticulous that way.

The reason that Caesar decided at that particular moment to take a Census, the likes of which he had never done before, was because The Sovereign God of the Universe was moving all the pieces of His universal "chessboard" to accomplish things exactly as He had willed from the beginning of time. Even a pagan monarch such as Caesar is a pawn in the hands of The Almighty. Yet another good reason for His people to respond to Him in faith, don't you think? Joseph and Mary began their journey to Bethlehem, which was between 80 and 100 miles from Nazareth, depending on the route they chose. This wasn't going to be an easy trip. It would have been hard enough for Joseph to take alone, much less without taking along his very pregnant wife. Mary and Joseph were poor people, so at worst Mary would have had to walk the entire way, and at best, she might have been able to ride upon a donkey. Either way, the trip would have taken five days or so at a normal pace, and there was no possible way that Mary could have made it at a normal pace. The trip to Bethlehem probably took them a week or more through some very dangerous and rough terrain. The constant threat of highwaymen, as well as, bitter cold nights would have kept the young couple in a constant state of alert and exhaustion. All that they would have been able to take along with them for food was bread. Lots and lots of bread, with possibly a few figs and some olive oil. The menu wouldn't have been very diverse. Three meals a day consisting of bread, bread, and more bread.

Mary and Joseph were no strangers to hard times. When the blessed birth announcement came, the poor girl would have been in danger of being brought before the priest, who would never have believed her story of an angelic message and a virgin birth. More than likely, the priests would have found her guilty of adultery and would have sentenced her to be executed, or at the very least, shunned by all the people. God, in His divine providence, took care of that potential disaster, by sending Mary to the home of a priest who had just been struck dumb for his lack of faith! Zachariah would have been a little more likely to believe the young girl's story about her conversation with the Angel Gabriel, since he too had recently had a similar conversation of his own! And then there is the witness of the unborn John The Baptist, who was giving glory to Jesus when both of them were still in the womb! (**Luke 1:41**). John The Baptist was pointing the world to Christ before he even took his first breath. Now that's dedication to your calling! Isn't God awesome?!

The whole experience of Joseph and Mary's journey of faith had been one of INCONVENIENCE. But there is not a single scripture that I can find where God apologizes to the young couple for causing them such hardship. Would you like to know why? Because God has every right to lead His people into hardship, that's why. It is the testing of our faith that make us stronger, not the granting of our every whim (**1 Peter 5:3-5; James 1:2-4**). I think that Christians today have forgotten this. We live in a society that demands convenience. We even have "Convenience Stores" for goodness sake. Christianity, however, is about sacrifice. Jesus died upon a cross and counted it as joy that He could sacrifice Himself for us (**Hebrews 12:12**). Knowing this, when will WE learn to take joy in our sufferings as we follow Him?

Mary and Joseph weren't quitters that's for sure. We need more people in the church who take joy in serving Christ through difficult times. I'm quite certain that after their long and arduous journey, that came upon the heels of their own families' scorn and contempt, they had at least expected to find a decent hotel room to get a good night's rest. Then came the disappointing news that they would have to sleep in a stable filled with smelly animals, and their droppings. And if that wasn't discouraging enough, then it happened... Mary's water broke. Let's just be honest, most of us at that point would have been tempted to sing the old Kris Kristofferson song, "*Why Me Lord?*", but we have no record of any complaining on behalf of this young couple, who must have been scared out of their wits. The Bible says

that **Mary gave birth to her first born Son and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes (strips of rags) and laid Him in the feeding trough.** When you're poor, you still make every effort to do the best that you can by your kids. That's what loving parents do. That is exactly what Joseph and Mary did. They gave that Child the best care that they possibly could, and God honored them for it.

When God calls us, He calls us to do the IMPOSSIBLE, and then He calls us to do the INCONVENIENT. He is God, and He has every right to do so. How far would you be willing to go to see the face of Jesus. I am willing to go out on a limb here and say that as soon as Mary and Joseph looked upon the beautiful face of the Savior of the world, the suffering was soon forgotten. We used to sing an old Hymn in the Baptist Church that said:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face
and the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
in the light of His glory and grace.*

One day, all the trials of this life will be over, and we shall behold Him in all His glory. In that glorious moment, we will not be thinking of how hard it was to follow Him. We will only be thinking of how He was worth every mile of the journey! Again I ask you, how far would you be willing to go, to see the face of Jesus?

The Inspiration

Over two thousand years later, we are still reliving Mary and Joseph's journey of faith. And why is that? Because true faith is inspirational, that's why. When I hear the words of Mary saying to the Angel, **"Let it be unto me as you have said"**, it challenges me to be fully devoted to the cause of Christ. God is using her faith to "draw" me closer to His Son! That's how The Word of God works. We hear it, and The Holy Spirit uses it to stir us from within, and we are inspired to follow. You see, Jesus wants us all to have an inspirational journey of faith that will inspire those around us to follow Christ with all of their hearts. Its called, "being a witness for Christ" (**Acts 1:8**).

If I went around the room this morning and asked, "why did you come here today?", I am certain that I would get many different answers from each of you. Some might say, "I came with my family". While others might say, "I came because I needed a place to pray". Some might even say, "I came because that's what I always do!". Some would say, "I need God's help with the things that I am struggling with". And of course, many would say, "I am here because I want to follow Christ".

The simple truth is, we are all here for one reason, and one reason only; Because God The Father is drawing us all, to find... HIM. The Bible is very clear that no one seeks after God on their own (**Romans 3:11**). We have all been called by God, to this place, at this moment in time, to draw closer to His Son. You see, we have all been called from different places and different walks of life, but God longs to send us on a journey of faith that will bring us all to the same place....to find HIM. Just like he did for Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men, He wants us to see the face of Jesus. Are you willing to risk everything for that single moment in time when you will be face to face with The King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Yes, the journey will be a long and difficult one, but won't it be worth it all just to see Jesus face to face?

Imagine what would happen, if everyone in this place today got down on their knees and prayed, "Lord, I don't know where this journey is going to lead me, but I am willing to risk everything to follow You. I surrender my all to You now Lord. Let it be unto me as You have said." What if we all decided that growing closer and closer to Christ each day was more important than anything else in this wretched world? If you really think about it, what do you have to lose? What is worth keeping you from a journey with Jesus? If we were truly willing to let go of everything to follow Christ, can you imagine what a revival we could have in this church that would spread throughout our community? God wants that for each of us this morning. If I didn't truly believe that, then I would resign my position as pastor and stop preaching forever. But I know that it's true. How do I know? Because you are here this morning, and no one comes to Christ unless The Father draws them! God is calling you today. Are you ready to begin your journey? If so, then get ready to watch God do the IMPOSSIBLE through you. He will guide you through the INCONVENIENT places to strengthen your faith, but He will never forsake you. And ultimately, He will make you an INSPIRATION for others to follow! I don't know about you, but I want that for my life. "So Lord, let it be unto me as you have said...c and let the journey begin!"

And ALL of God's people said... TRUTH!!!