

A Difficult but Joyous Journey

Luke 1:39-55

A man in Salt Lake City decided to send out 600 Christmas cards to total strangers. He got telephone directories from several cities, addressed 600 cards to people he had never met, put his return address on the envelopes and mailed them. That's crazy!

What's even crazier is that he received 117 responses from these total strangers. One lady wrote, "It was so good to hear from you. Your card arrived the day I got home from the hospital, and I can't tell you what an encouragement it was to hear from an old friend."

Another wrote, "I have to admit that when we received your card we couldn't really picture you. We had to think hard for a long time before we remembered. By the way, please give our regards to your father. He is such a wonderful man!"

But I think this one took the cake. One guy wrote, "It was so good to hear from you after all these years. By the way, we're going to be in Salt Lake City next summer. Would it be all right if we came and spent a few days with you?"ⁱ I wonder if they ever showed up!

I also wonder how Mary, the mother of Jesus, notified her cousin Elizabeth that she was coming for a visit. After all, Mary lived in Nazareth, a town west of the Sea of Galilee, and Elizabeth lived in the hill country of Judah, about 80 to 100 miles away. How did she send word she was on her way?

Luke doesn't mention whether Mary made any preparations for the trip or how she traveled; she may have gone on foot or as part of a caravan. In Mary's day, a person traveling by foot could cover about 20 miles per day. If Mary went by caravan, she would have arrived in about three days. Either way it was quite a journey.

Keeping that in mind, listen closely to our lesson this morning.

What has always intrigued me about these passages are those first three words right at the beginning of verse 39. They're so common that we overlook them, but they are significant.

"At That Time..." No idea what "at that time" refers to, but a casual reading suggests that Mary made this journey immediately after Gabriel's announcement to her. The announcement that let her know that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, and that the child whom she would bear would be called the Son of God. This would be quite a revelation for a 13 or 14-year-old girl to receive.

I wonder... in her haste to make this journey, did she confide in Joseph and let him know her plans to head out toward Elizabeth in Judah? Perhaps Mary wanted to consult with her older and wiser cousin about how to handle this delicate situation.

Of course, Elizabeth had her own interesting situation. Elizabeth was married to a priest named Zechariah and was way past the normal age of child-bearing. Yet she, too, was carrying a very special child--a child who also would become known throughout the region. He would be named John, but we know him better as John the Baptist.

Because it was a 3 or 4 day journey from Bethlehem to Judah, there was plenty of time for Mary to ponder the wonder of what was happening to her. Surely she knew that

angels don't appear to every girl--particularly to tell them that they will become with child by the Holy Spirit. What was happening to her . . . and what did it all mean?

Finally, she arrived at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. It was a wondrous and joyful scene as these two cousins, so different in age, greeted one another.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, Luke tells us, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "**Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!**"

Mary answered with a song: "**My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me--holy is his name . . .**"

I wonder what thoughts went through Mary's head as she made her way to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home in the hill country? I wonder what thoughts went through her head after Jesus was born when the shepherds left to go back to their flocks after that holy night in Bethlehem?

In the next chapter, Luke 2:19, we read: "**But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.**" I wonder what thoughts went through her head as she watched her Son grow? I wonder what thoughts went through her head as she watched her Son suffer and die for the sins of the world? What thoughts run through the head as the mother of the Christ child?

Perhaps she thought, first of all, that life certainly has some strange twists and turns. The announcement by the angel that she would bear God's son was literally right out of the blue. Which is probably a good thing. I mean, how do you prepare yourself for such an event?

Right from the very beginning her life as a new mother had twists and turns. The story of the pilgrimage to Bethlehem is enchanting, and we gloss over it quickly as we tell the Christmas story.

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

"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 a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. . ." (Luke 2:1-7)

Mary must have known then that her life would be no picnic. There are mothers here this morning who can share the harrowing experiences of childbirth. But none here today had to spend the last few days of pregnancy on the back of a donkey. And no child here today was born in a stable with the odors of cattle and sheep in the birthplace.

Mary must have had an inkling at Jesus' birth that life would not be easy. In Matthew's account of the first Christmas, Mary and Joseph and the new babe are forced to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. So again, Mary and Joseph were on the move--fleeing to protect the life of their son.

The next dozen or so years in Mary's life were doubtless good ones. While she and Joseph were never prosperous, he was an able provider and her oldest son, Jesus, was growing into a young man, finding favor with God and man.

But then, something happened to Joseph, and scripture doesn't give us details. Joseph is never mentioned again in the Gospels and most assume that Mary probably became a young widow. Jesus would have taken Joseph's place in the carpenter's shop--a role he would fill until about his 30th birthday when he was baptized by John and began his ministry.

Life took some strange twists and turns for the mother of our Lord. Just like it does in many people's lives. Many have a difficult time coping with life because we think life should be smooth and predictable. And when it's not, some of us are unable to cope.

Yet, in the providence of God, we discover that the most reliable times of growth are when life is challenging. People who cope successfully with life understand the importance of discipline and self-denial, realize that life is a training school, and that happiness is not a steady state, but an elusive quality best achieved in search of something higher.

Life certainly has some strange twists and turns. **Mary may have wondered about life's twist and turns, but she surely also wondered about God's faithfulness and how He always keeps His promises.**

Look at how Mary responds to her situation. She's overwhelmed that God, the author of all creation, would choose her for the high honor of bearing His Son. In her words, "**He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant . . .**" In her mind only a kind and gracious God would bypass the wealthy and powerful of this world to have a peasant girl bear the Messiah.

You and I don't fall into God's plan in quite the same way that Mary did, and yet each of us knows what it is to be humbled by God's concern for us. We don't deserve such providential care. I mean, who are we that God should be mindful of our needs?

And yet, with a deep awareness of our gratitude, we teach our children to bow their heads and pray, "God is great, God is good."

And God is good. Not only because He chose the lowly maiden of Nazareth, not only because He's aware of our needs, but because He keeps His promises. That's a major part of this great miracle in Mary's eyes. The coming of the Messiah was the fulfillment of a long-awaited promise.

There's one more thing that I think Mary pondered as she made her way toward her older cousin Elizabeth. **That was the love she felt in her heart--love for her unborn son, love for her cousin Elizabeth and love for the God who had selected her for this special assignment.**

Mary's story is the oldest and most intimate story of all. It's a story that's been repeated millions of times throughout history. It's the story of a mother's love for her child. Even when he was a grown man with a ministry she could only barely understand, he was still first and foremost her son.

Mary's love for Jesus, however, is but a pale reflection of God's love for all His children. That's why the star shines above the Christmas tree. It's the star of hope, it's the star of peace, it's the star of joy, but mostly, it's the star of love.

Bruce Larson tells a story that appeared years ago in the *Denver Post*. A week or so before Christmas, a pastor told his congregation about a needy family facing a very bleak Christmas. One father decided to do something about that. He and his son set out in the family pickup truck to cut down a fresh evergreen and deliver it to this struggling family.

On the way they ran into a rock slide and a boulder hit the truck. It was destroyed. The windshield was smashed and while the father was not hurt, the young boy was cut by the glass and was bleeding severely. They tried to wave down a passing motorist to help, but the motorist didn't stop.

Finally, after more than two hundred cars had whizzed by, one stopped. The couple in the car took care of the injured boy, returned the two of them to their home, and then went on their way. The father and son never got the names of the two folks who had helped.

In a week's time the truck was repaired, and the boy's injury healed. On Christmas Eve, the pastor asked this same man if he would deliver a basket of food and toys to the needy family he had set out to bring the tree to earlier on. He was glad to do so.

They loaded up the truck and drove to the address they were given and rang the doorbell. And, as you can imagine, the door opened and couple who had stopped to help him on the highway just weeks before was the needy couple that they had started out to help at the beginning of it all.ⁱⁱ

Life doesn't always work out that neatly, of course. But Christmas is about love.

I don't know what kind of holiday season this has been for you thus far. I hope it's been good. But I know for some it's been tough. And if it's been tough, remember these three lessons from Mary's experience: Life takes some strange twists and turns but God is faithful to His promises. God loves you and will never forsake you. The star of Christmas still shines today.

ⁱ <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/christmas--if-christmas-comes-melvin-newland-sermon-on-christmas-32337>.

ⁱⁱ *My Creator, My Friend* (Waco: Word Books).