

Sermon Note: The Journey to Bethlehem

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Introduction

As we continue our Advent series based on Adam Hamilton's *The Journey*, we follow Mary and Joseph along the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. What might sound like a simple line in the story—"they went... to Bethlehem"—was in reality a demanding trip over rugged terrain, taken late in pregnancy, under the pressure of an imperial decree. The journey is marked by weariness, risk, and uncertainty as they press forward under impossible conditions. By the time they arrive, there is no guest room available, and the long-anticipated child is born in a space meant for animals. This week turns our attention to what it means to keep moving when the path is hard and the conditions are far from ideal, and to the quiet ways God's presence takes shape in the middle of disruption, limitation, and unmet expectations.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=def5qHmhjqs>

In *Home Alone* (1990) Kate McCallister frantically tries to get back to Chicago: reroutes, setbacks, and her final decision to accept a ride with a polka band.

Why This Video?

This scene from *Home Alone* (1990) captures Kate's exhaustion, which has reached its limit, and her determination to continue through any obstacle. Her declaration—"This is Christmas, the season of perpetual hope"—reframes her crisis as something much bigger than logistics. When a stranger overhears and offers help, she accepts without hesitation, revealing what happens when love becomes our sole compass. Comfort, dignity, and reasonable plans fall away, and forward movement through impossible circumstances is the only option. This shows how desperation and hope can coexist, and how help sometimes arrives from the most unexpected sources—when we're finally willing to receive it.

Video Discussion Questions

1. Kate has been awake for 60 hours, traveling from Chicago to Paris to Dallas to Scranton. What does her physical exhaustion reveal about the cost of determination?
2. The airline agent keeps saying "everything's full" and offers only a hotel room. How does Kate's response shift from frustration to a declaration of hope?
3. Kate says, "This is Christmas, the season of perpetual hope." How does invoking the season itself become part of her argument for why giving up isn't an option?
4. Kate's hyperbolic promise—"if I have to sell my soul to the devil himself"—expresses desperate resolve. When have you felt a similar willingness to do whatever it takes to reach someone or something that mattered?
5. Gus Polinski overhears Kate's crisis and offers an unexpected solution. What does this moment suggest about the role of strangers in our hardest journeys?
6. Kate accepts a ride with "polka bums" without hesitation. What has to happen internally before we can receive help that doesn't match our expectations?

7. Gus says, "You've got to get home and see your kid. It's Christmas time." How does the simplicity of his reasoning cut through complexity and offer clarity?
8. Both Kate's journey and Mary and Joseph's journey involve relentless obstacles and exhaustion. How does this clip help you see the nativity story as something grounded in real human struggle rather than sentiment?

Luke 2:1-7 (NRSVue)

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

Scripture Study Questions

1. Luke opens by naming Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius, yet the story unfolds among ordinary people in a small town. What does this tell us about where God chooses to work?
2. Joseph and Mary travel at a time that is anything but convenient. When have you experienced God's call or presence in circumstances you did not choose?
3. Mary is described simply as "expecting a child." How does this detail ground the nativity story in human reality over religious sentimentality?
4. The text says, "there was no place for them in the guest room." How does this detail foreshadow the way the world will receive Jesus throughout his life?
5. The manger becomes the cradle for the newborn Messiah. What does the contrast between this humble setting and the titles "Savior," "Messiah," and "Lord" reveal about God's work in the world?
6. The holy family arrives weary, displaced, and without a proper place to rest. How does this story challenge or expand your understanding of where and how God meets us?
7. The shepherds—"night shift" workers whom society dismissed as unclean—hear the announcement first. How does God's choice to reveal the Savior's birth to shepherds rather than religious elites shape your understanding of the gospel?
8. The angel tells the shepherds, "Don't be afraid! I bring wonderful, joyous news for all people." In what parts of your life do you need to hear that message today?
9. The shepherds say, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened." How does their immediate response challenge you to move from hearing about God's work to experiencing it personally?

Weekly Action

Choose one situation this week where things feel harder than you expected—a strained relationship, an overwhelming responsibility, a delayed hope, or an uncertain transition. Each day, pause in the middle of that difficulty and pray this simple phrase: "God, you are with me here." Write it on a note card or set a daily reminder on your phone. Rather than waiting for circumstances to improve, practice acknowledging God's presence right in those moments. Let this become a steady refrain throughout the week.

Prayer

God of the journey, you met Mary and Joseph when they were desperate, exhausted, turned away. You met them on the hardest part of their journey when nothing went as they expected. Teach us to trust in your presence even when we're facing difficult circumstances, unexpected detours, and moments of weariness. Help us to keep moving forward, confident that you are with us. Through Christ, who was born among us and remains with us still. Amen.

Disclosure: This content was developed by Rev. Bob Rhodes using AI tools in alignment with La Jolla UMC AI Usage Guidelines. In this case, AI assisted the author with initial drafting, adapting study questions from source materials, structuring discussion prompts, and refining language for clarity and tone. All final text was written, reviewed, and approved by Rev. Bob Rhodes.