

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, the Third Sunday of Advent

A Faith Journey

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

December 17, 2017

Luke 1:26-38, Luke 2:1-20

Our scripture readings for today are from the Gospel according to Luke and are the suggested gospel readings in the lectionary for the 4th Sunday of Advent and for Christmas Eve. Because we will not be holding a Christmas Eve service this year, and because this is my last Sunday with you, I have elected to use them today.

The reading from Luke 1 is the story of the angel Gabriel telling Mary, a virgin, that she will be the mother of our Lord and Savior and also telling her that her elderly relative Elizabeth also it pregnant.

In Elizabeth's case Her child will grow up to be John the Baptizer who will proclaim to the world that Mary's child, Jesus, is the long awaited Messiah.

Gabriel had also come to Elizabeth's husband Zechariah earlier telling him that his elderly, long barren wife would give birth to a son.

Through these events we are once again reminded that nothing is truly impossible for God.

Six months after appearing to Zechariah, Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she will give birth to a son --- a barren elderly woman and a teenage virgin girl both are embarking on a path that both thought was impossible.

This story does not seem to be credible at all, but it happened. Our minds are analytical and logical, at least most of the time. We look at facts and what we know and understand. But we can't understand how these two women became pregnant. It defies logic. God does impossible things, things we cannot always understand but which we must accept on faith, just as Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth did. That the two women were pregnant did not make sense but nevertheless it happened. It was the beginning of our faith story and that of Christians everywhere.

But the story continues and reaches its fruition in our readings from Luke 2..

Advent is a time of reflecting on the journey, a long walk, from Nazareth to Bethlehem for Mary and Joseph over 2000 years ago. It was a difficult trip over incredibly

poor roads fraught with many dangers. It must have been particularly hard for Mary who was almost nine months pregnant and heavy with child. Travel was not easy in those days and when they arrived, they had no place at an inn and had to stay in a stable where the Christ child was born. There was no bed for the child other than an animal feeding trough filled with hay, a manger.

The trip to that stable in Bethlehem was easier for the shepherds. They didn't have all that far to go on their trip. It was a relatively short distance from their pastures in the hills to that stable but it was night. Even with the light from the star, it was still hard. The terrain was probably rough and difficult to walk on in the dim light. Even in daylight, it was not a smooth path. Sheep were pastured on the sides of rocky hills. It was mountainous terrain. The flatter land would have been reserved for farming and for homes. Good land could not be wasted on sheep.

Later the Magi came on a journey from much further away. Their trip was so long that Mary and Joseph's journey was short by comparison. They came on commonly used trails and roads but nevertheless, it was also a hard trip on paths where travelers were often accosted by thieves or encountered other hazards.

Yes, going to Bethlehem was not an easy trip. There were no paved interstate highways, buses, airplanes or high speed trains. It was a difficult trip for anyone no matter where they were coming from.

During Advent, we have in a manner of speaking been going to Bethlehem as we studied the gospels' telling of Christ's coming, first as the Messiah, our Savior, and then his second coming. That has been an easy trip for us, at least I hope it has, but our personal journey really did not start on December 3, 2017, the first Sunday of Advent this year. None of us embarked on our journey to Bethlehem so recently.

Think back. When did your personal journey to Christ begin?

For most of us, it began when we were baptized as infants and when our parents took us to church and Sunday school each week to learn about our Lord and Savior. Some of you may have begun your journey through accepting Christ later in life, through a sudden conversion experience, by insights gained in inquirer classes or confirmation classes, or in quite a number of other ways. However you began that journey is not really important. What matters is that you have undertaken it.

In my case, my parents were not church goers. An uncle took it upon himself to

take my brother and me to Sunday school and church when we were young. That began my personal journey to Bethlehem.

However you began your journey, you have most likely encountered some rough roads – some pot holes along the way. It is rare when that doesn't happen. Certain things may cause you to doubt. You may begin to question why all of your prayers weren't answered. You might have "stopped out" of church attendance for a while, and so on. This happens to many Christians at one time or another but hopefully they eventually come back and resume the journey,

But the journey does not end at Bethlehem. In reality it only starts there with the birth of our Savior which we celebrate in eight days. It ends on a cross about 33 years later with the crucifixion of that child --- crucifixion for forgiveness of our sin --- crucifixion that assures our salvation.

Here at Conley Memorial we also begin a journey today as I conclude my tenure as your pastor, and as you look forward to a new pastor being named. I leave you with love and with regrets. May the Lord continue to bless this wonderful congregation in the years ahead.

Thanks be to God.

Amen!