

Christmas Traveling

[Luke 2:1-6](#)

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

Early in December, we always wonder how we are going to get to Bethlehem this year. Especially this year. But Bethlehem isn't really a place you get to. It's the place where God gets to you.

Before long, many of us will start traveling for the holidays. Traveling over Christmas is always a hassle, but especially this year. Those who don't want to deal with the long lines in the airports will take to the interstates and deal with the traffic and weather, or to the trains and deal with crowding and inevitable delays. There is no easy way to get wherever it is you're going over Christmas.

This is one of the great perks of working for the church. For more than twenty years, I've watched my friends slog their way through holiday traveling and have always rejoiced that I get to work on Christmas. So I stay put.

However, as a person who has read the Christmas story a few times now, I realize that no one finds the Christmas miracle by staying at home. Who are the characters in the story that make it to the manger? Of course, Joseph and Mary who traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to pay his taxes. The shepherds who were away from home working in the fields when the angels came. Even the angels had to leave their home in heaven. And eventually some foreign wise men, who got lost in their travels, found the Christ child in Bethlehem. The only thing these diverse characters have in common is that none of them was home when they saw the Christmas miracle.

By contrast, who missed the miracle? Caesar the emperor and Quirinius the governor of Syria. Herod the king also missed the miracle, even though he heard the child was born. Herod's priests and scribes missed it, even though they knew Christ would be born in Bethlehem. And the innkeeper missed the miracle, even though it was happening in his backyard. The reason they all missed the miracle was they stayed safely at home.

It doesn't matter if you know Jesus is about to be born, or where he is to be born, or that this season is really all about his being born. What matters is seeing him this year. As the story goes, the only people who see the miracle of salvation are those who know they are not in the right place.

I'm not really saying you need to leave home physically for the holidays. I'm saying that you need to leave the life that is comfortable, but not in the right place. And I'm saying that the road to the manger is confession. For as we confess that we cannot get our lives where we know they ought to be, then our hearts are opened to the forgiving grace of a Savior who restores us to the right place.

Who here today really thinks they have life just right? Are all your relationships in the right place? What about your children, your career, your finances? What about your relationship with God? Is that in the right place? I ask these questions not to indict you, but to invite you to join those in the narrative who find the miracle, and the only people who find it are those who know they need it.

Caesar and Herod and the busy innkeeper missed the miracle because they were in places comfortable enough to distract them from their souls. Any place where the yearning of the soul is distracted is the wrong place to be. The only right place to be in this story is on your knees in front of the manger. That is your true home, your home with God. Everything else is just a motel in a foreign land. You can get yourself a nice motel, purchase it, and live in it for years. You can decorate the motel for the holidays, fill it with presents, and invite lots of people to join you for a party. But if it is a home you want, you'll have to dig through all of the comfort you have collected and confront your restless soul, which will remain restless until it worships before that manger. The only way you get to that manger is to tell the truth about how restless your soul really is.

So, and this is the best advice I have for you this Christmas, don't try to insulate yourself from whatever it is that causes you stress at Christmas. If it's the busy-ness of the season, don't resolve to be calm this year. If your stress comes from obnoxious relatives or in-laws, don't refuse to see them just because they are difficult. If it's the parties, cards, traveling, or shopping that makes you crazy, don't disguise your disdain for stress by telling yourself you're too spiritual to do that stuff. Because stress is part of Christmas. It is the indicator that you are not in control of life; you're not even in control of Christmas. Thus, stress serves as a call to worship.

The point of Christmas isn't to have a wonderful celebration. The point is to receive the Savior.

If you are going to truly enter the Christmas narrative and become a part of the salvation story, you have to remember that the story starts with people being stressed out of their minds. As Luke tells the story, Joseph was from Bethlehem, a sophisticated suburb of Jerusalem. But Joseph had been living up in Nazareth, which was a country village. He had to come back home to pay his taxes. When he traveled home, he brought with him his country fiancé who was pregnant--really pregnant. Maybe as they traveled, they wondered how this pregnancy would play with Joseph's relatives in Bethlehem. But the text tells us that for some reason, there wasn't any room for them in Bethlehem. Apparently not even with Joseph's relatives. Maybe that had something to do with this surprise pregnancy. The best he can do is negotiate a barn for Mary to use for having her baby. So don't try to tell Joseph about stress at the holidays! And don't be afraid to confront the untidy realities of your own life either. It is all a way of entering the story, of taking the road to the manger where salvation is waiting for you.

The same dynamic is true for our world as well. Some have wondered how we will ever get up for Christmas this year. There is just so much stress: the war in Afghanistan, the sagging economy, anthrax all over the city, towers lying in ruins in New York, repairs at the Pentagon, thousands of families having their first Christmas without the loved ones who died. Are we supposed to forget all that for a few weeks and take a holiday from the wounded world? Absolutely not. All that stress has made us travel far from the illusion that we could stay safely in Caesar's hometown. And it has placed us on the road to Bethlehem. The only question is will we keep traveling until we encounter our Savior?

Recently, I received a card from one of our members who said, "With the holidays fast approaching, I find that this year it is harder than ever to get excited about Christmas. But this year it is easier than ever to get excited about the Christmas story." There it is. There is the point.

This year when you're acutely aware you and the world are not in the right place, you are now ready to leave the home you've built for yourself to find your true home with the family of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because the miracle of the Christmas story is that even God became homeless to find you.

O God, prevent us from rushing by the manger. Give us the courage of the Spirit to see how much we need your Son to be born in our lives, for he alone can lead us home to you, our Father. Amen.