Sunday, December 13, 1992
THE JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM (No. 2 in a Series: Christmas Journeys)
Luke 2:1-7

The starting point for a journey is not always where it seems. For example, even though Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, the story of their trip to Bethlehem begins in Rome, the center of the western world at that time.

The story begins in Rome with Augustus Caesar, the nephew of Julius Caesar, the man who defeated Antony and Cleopatra and made himself the sole ruler of Rome — the first Emperor of Rome and, for forty-four years, the master of the western world. The story of the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem begins with a royal command that everyone go to their own hometown to be registered. Whether such a census actually took place or not, and at this particular time, we do not know. Historians vary in their opinions. Luke's primary aim is to establish Jesus in Bethlehem and in continuity with the royal house of David.

This much we do know: we can never escape the machinery of life, never. In every well-run government, there is a certain amount of red tape and regulation that is inevitable and inescapable. In every well-run family, in every well-run institution, indeed in every well-run life, there is a certain amount of order that often seems to be like so much red tape, and we can never completely escape it. Sometimes it seems as though it ties everything up in knots or that we are caught like a fly in a spider's web. Even God, when coming into our world, did not circumvent the machinery that sometimes so irritates us and makes life so unpleasant. Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Mary and Joseph had gone there due to a government requirement that everyone be officially registered.

The journey to Bethlehem also makes the point that emperors, governments, and laws can serve the purpose of God, often without knowing it. There does not have to be a miracle or an unusual event for God to be at work.

In addition, this journey to Bethlehem because of a government rule reminds us that we cannot always tell how important a thing is by the prominence or lack of prominence of the place where it occurs or by the prominence we give to the event itself when it happens. Some things that seem so important at the time turn out to be utterly trivial, while things that seem so slight at the moment, so routine, turn out to be world-shaking in the long run. In the year 1809, Napoleon, on the march toward the victory that was his ultimate ruin, defeated the Austrian armies in the Battle of Wagram. This, so everyone thought, was an important, world-shaking event. Everybody, everywhere knew about it. In the same year, 1809, a boy was born in Shrewsbury, England, the son of an English doctor, and another boy was born in the same year in Hardin County, Kentucky, the son of a wandering illiterate laborer. One was Charles Darwin; the other, Abraham Lincoln. These were the decisive, world-shaking events of the year 1809.

The emperor, who seemed so powerful as the journey to Bethlehem begins to unfold, and the decree, which seemed so important because it came from the emperor in that prominent city, all eventually fade into relative insignificance before the birth that took place in Bethlehem in an obscure corner of the world.

This journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem begins with the high and mighty in Rome and involves the low and little people — the people who are pushed around in life. Joseph and

Mary complied with the regulations; they had no choice, really. It was not a convenient time for them to make a trip. I suppose Joseph could have gone alone, but he knew the time of birth was not far off. He also had been told in a dream that this child was of the Holy Spirit, and he wanted to be with Mary wherever the baby was born. So Mary and Joseph made their way from the northern part of Galilee, southward through Jerusalem, and then on to the little village of Bethlehem.

Have you ever noticed that things look backward as well as forward in life? Things do not happen out of the blue. There is continuity in life; one thing leads to another. There are connections. What we do today will have consequences for what we are tomorrow, and what we are today is, to a great degree, the result of what we did yesterday.

When God entered the world in the person of Jesus, God chose to be born into a people who had been formed into a community because of a unique religious history. In other words, Jesus was a branch on a full-grown tree, a shoot out of the stump of Jesse. He was part of a history that began with Abraham and Sarah and continued up through the prophets and priests.

We, too, look backward at Christmas as well as forward. We look back to the place we came from, to the home in which we first met life, and if it was a good home with a happy family, we are filled with gratitude. Many of our journeys during this season are those that take us back to where we grew up and connect us again with our ancestors. We also, at this time of year, perhaps more than at any other time, make our journeys backward in our memory. We recall Christmases of the past and continue with Christmas traditions that come from our past, which we then carry on into the present and future.

Remember the song, “I’ll Be Home for Christmas, If Only in My Dreams”? We all journey back to our own Bethlehems at this time of year. We look back to the soil from which we have come and to the family circles that have given us our life, introduced us to the meaning of life, and helped us to meet it. These are the important things about the story of the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem — not the details of the story, or whether it actually happened exactly that way or not.

There in the town of Bethlehem, Mary’s baby was born. The only thing on earth as common as birth is death. Both are utterly mysterious; both are completely beyond our comprehension. But birth is the greater mystery — the creation of life where there was none, the beginning of a new person and a new personality, an individual who just might change the course of the world. The hidden possibilities and potentialities, all the wonder and the beauty of a life that is yet to be. This certainly is the mystery of all mysteries, and it stirs us whether the birth is the birth of Jesus or the birth of our own child or grandchild. A birth is always the beginning of a new journey, both for the parents and for the child that is born.

The gospel of Luke also tells us in one part of one brief sentence, “And 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 for them in the inn.”

“She laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.” What does this tell us about our own journeys in life? It tells us, among other things, as I have many times said from this pulpit before, things in life do not have to be perfect to be good. The circumstances of life are not always favorable to life’s highest and finest possibilities.

Here are a few examples from other lives, and you can add your own from your experience. John Keats was the son of a livery stable keeper. By the time he was twenty, he was infected with tuberculosis and died when he was twenty-six. And yet out of those ungracious circumstances came the magic of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and all the other poems that have sung in the minds of English-speaking people ever since.

Hans Christian Andersen was the son of a cobbler. His mother and father were so poor that they had to make their own furniture, and the bed that he was born in was the frame of a coffin that a count had died in. And yet out of those unfavorable circumstances came the most delicate, fragile fairy tales that the world has ever heard. Marian Anderson lost her father when she was a child, and her mother worked all those early years in Wanamaker’s store in Philadelphia.

Indeed, the circumstances in our life’s journey are not always favorable to life’s highest and finest possibilities. At times, it almost seems that when the circumstances of life seem to be the most unfavorable, we sometimes have the finest flower of human achievement. “No room in the inn!” A cattle stall is not exactly the place you would expect the Savior of the world to be born.

“No room in the inn.” The story reminds us that there is no promise in the gospels that the circumstances of life will always be favorable, or what we had planned on, or what we would choose. Mary and Joseph did not expect the baby to be born in a stable. It was not their first choice. Sometimes in this life, like Mary and Joseph, we have to put up with our second-best or third, but then we discover that it has no bearing on the outcome anyway. The promise is that God will always more than match the circumstances of life with the strength to meet them. “No room in the inn.” What a prophecy of things to come in the life of Jesus. To a large degree, that was to be the Savior’s experience throughout his ministry — no room for his teachings in the minds of people or for his quality of spirit in their lives, no room in the synagogue for his reforming ideas or his prophetic message. The fact that there was no room for him in the culture of his time or the majority of the people of his time brought him at last to his death on the cross.

Harry Emerson Fosdick said at one point that “inhospitality was the central tragedy of Jesus’ life.” What a disappointment it must have been for Mary and Joseph to arrive at the end of their journey, Bethlehem, and find that there was no room in the inn. What a disappointment it must have been for Jesus to arrive at the end of his life on the cross and discover that for many people there was no room for his spirit and for his teachings in their lives.

And I wonder today among us, even in our Christmas celebrations, if Jesus discovers there is no room for him.

And on a broader scale, how frequently do we shut out the highest in life? I do not mean only that we lead practically overcrowded lives, cluttered with so much preoccupying business that from our limited time and attention the highest is shut out. Inspiring books are not read, moving music is not heard — we are too busy. We miss enriching friendships and possibilities of happiness in our family life; we are preoccupied. No room — Isn’t that much of the explanation for the sorry loss of many of the priceless opportunities in our lives?

It is my view that the major enemy of the Christian faith today is not atheism but secularism, not the theoretical denial of Christ, but the practical crowding out of Christ and everything he stands for. People say, “I love the church and what it stands for; I want to have more time for

my spiritual journey, for cultivating the spiritual within me, but there's no room in my life for it. The house of my life is full."

I can imagine that at the inn in Bethlehem, had they known what Mary's baby would become in the world, some of them at least would have found a place for the family. Is it not true that we find places for the things we truly care about?

They crowded Jesus completely out because they never guessed who he would be.

But we know. We have no such excuse. We know the story of Jesus. We know what a difference his life, teachings, death, and resurrection have made in the world and can make in our own individual lives if we do not crowd out his Spirit. We know that the record of the three short years of his active life has done more to regenerate and improve our living together than all the philosophers and military leaders in history.

The good news, of course, is that since that first Christmas in Bethlehem, there have been enough people among us now and in years past that have made room for the spirit of Christ in their lives. And what a difference it has made in these individual lives, in their families, in their other relationships, and in our world at large.

What a change a little hospitality can make — hospitality to new ideas, to new people, to letting the spirit of Christ have room in our life.

This spirit of hospitality, of making room in our lives, goes far beyond the Christmas story. Much of the world's troubles have been and still are caused by inhospitality. Has ever a new and saving idea come to the human race without hearing the cry, "No room"? The saviors come. God sends them. It is we, the masses of people, who often respond with, "No room."

This Christmas, on your journey wherever or whatever it might be, I ask you to make room for the spirit of Christ in the inn of your life and then to let that same spirit accompany you on your journeys. Then you will truly experience the good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people. Amen.