

“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.” Luke 2:4-5 (NIV)

It may not be Christmas when you're reading this but don't think I've chosen this verse by mistake.

It is easy to overlook this verse when reading the story of the nativity amongst the Christmas busyness and celebrations but that's why it's good to look at it out of season. Sometimes when we look at scripture out of season it can help us look at it with fresh eyes.

There's been a bit of an unintentional theme over the last few days - living water, faith and journeys, and I guess I am continuing with the theme in a way here. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is not the only journey being undertaken here. There is a journey of learning and faith happening alongside the physical journey from point A to point B.

For Mary and Joseph the timing of the forced travel couldn't have been much worse. Heavily pregnant and ready to give birth at any moment and having to travel. I can't imagine that would be easy - having never been blessed with pregnancy I'm afraid I can only guess at the exact level of discomfort that this would have been, especially at the time without the luxury of air conditioned cars etc.

So the story begins with discomfort and faith that they will be able to stay somewhere at the end of the journey - no online bookings available in the first century. This faith journey in a way echoes the story of the exodus and the journey to the promised land. Just as the Israelites travelled 40 years to get to the promised land, and it wasn't always comfortable, so Mary and Joseph endure the discomfort of the journey to the beginning of the emergence of the new promised land - the birth of Jesus and the start of His ministry in a way. Much as we think of Jesus' ministry as those 3 years from the temptation in the wilderness to the crucifixion and resurrection...I believe it actually started with his birth.

This may be an unpopular opinion, but Jesus' very birth is announced to Shepherds and is in itself a type of ministry. It tells that a new age is beginning, that it is imminent and that it's time to get ready. The fact that the star was followed by the Wise Men from the East (and just because there were 3 gifts doesn't mean that there were only 3 wise men...there could have been more, or even less...men just means more than 1). Although we celebrate epiphany on the 12th day of Christmas (6th January), if we read the story in more depth and read about the appearance of the star it implies that Jesus could have been 2 years old by the time the wise men arrived (otherwise why would have Herod killed all boys 2 years old and under?). I like to think that if that was the case, the wise men didn't find Jesus in the animal shelter of the house, but that he would have been in other accommodation by then. Probably not particularly rich, maybe just a simple house where Joseph could ply his trade as a handyman (the Greek word implies Joseph was more than just a carpenter). In the ancient world the man would have had to provide for his family - Paul worked as a tent maker as he spread the gospel. But going back to the ministry and journey. Joseph and Mary's journey at that point ended with the joy of birth, and started with the new journey of parenthood and in the case of bringing up Jesus, a different type of parenting (think Jesus as a boy in the temple remaining to discuss scripture in a way much more advanced than expected of his age at the time). All these things were a type of ministering to the people around before his formal ministry began. Grappling with scripture and opening it up in a new way to those who you are talking with can be enough to help other think and teach scripture more appropriately.

I won't go into any more thoughts about Jesus' ministry journey before the formal one began at his baptism, but I will leave you this thought...Is it possible to be too young (or too old) to begin ministering to those we come into contact with? I personally don't believe so. St Francis said to preach always but use words when necessary (not exact quote). In other words our very lives

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Tamsyn Moreton-Trayler

should be our ministry, showing outwardly what being God's children is really about (and yes, that is really a very hard calling!).

Pray;

Lord, you came to earth as a baby and began your ministry just by being born. Help us to realise that being old or young matters little and that it is our lives that actually are the most important parts of our ministry to the people in the world. Help us to work on our lives so that we can shine a positive light out into the world so that those who do not know you want to know you just from us preaching to the world through how we conduct ourselves. We thank you that most journeys you ask us to partake in may begin with difficulty and discomfort but that ultimately you finish them with joy just as you promise in Jeremiah where you tell us you have plans to prosper and not harm us, giving us a hope and a future. Amen.