

Kids Stump the Preacher: It's a Baby!!!

May 9, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Luke 2:1-20

Merry Christmas and Happy Mother's Day?

So today we have sort-of a weird, awkward coming together of two very different celebrations. The first one is a day that is actually not a "thing" on the church calendar at all – but it very much is a "thing" on the greeting card calendar and that is Mother's Day. That day when we remember and celebrate our moms and all those who have taken a nurturing, "mothering" role in our lives – whether it be grandmothers, aunts, big sisters, teachers, family friends, neighbors, mentors, beloved babysitters...all those women – and even sometimes men – in our lives who have taken it upon themselves to love and cherish and nurture and care for us. When we say that "it takes a village to raise a child," Mother's Day is about our mothers – absolutely. But it is also about that village.

But then, today we are also doing something a little bit weird and different. As we continue our way through our "Kids Stump the Preacher" sermon series, one of the kids' favorite Bible stories that was requested was the Christmas story. The story of Baby Jesus in the manger. And so even though we are about as far away from Christmas as we can get, we are returning to this story this week. In May. On Mother's Day.

And all you moms out there, isn't that just about the perfect metaphor for life with kids? Finding ourselves in the middle of something that doesn't always altogether make sense, because...well...that's just where the kids' little minds and souls take us? And so what do we do? We roll with it.

I have to laugh that in Julia's Kindergarten class, the class is counting down the days until the end of school. And so for these last 26 days of school (one day for each letter of the alphabet), the class is doing something different and special and fun each day. Things like blowing bubbles or chewing gum or having a day in school with no shoes. On the first day of their countdown to summer, it was animal day, and each kid got to take in their favorite stuffed animal.

And what did Julia take? Her stuffed grinch. That she saved up for and bought with her own money because she just loves the story of How the Grinch Stole Christmas THAT much. Christmastime...not Christmastime...doesn't matter. In our house, the story of the Grinch is appropriate year-round.

Although, in our house we NEVER seem to know quite what season it is...I may have finally put our collection of nativity scenes away just last week. So...there's that.

But then, another deep truth of parenting is that sometimes, when we can roll with the crazy, seasonally-inappropriate, doesn't-seem-to-make-a-whole-lot-of-sense-right-now ideas that get thrown our way, often times we can discover a powerful deeper meaning and truth underneath the hilarity of it all.

And I think that is very much the case with the Christmas story.

It's a story that we know well. The Emperor Caesar Augustus has just issued a decree that everyone should be registered. This was the first census that the emperor had ordered during his reign, and evidently, this was THE major event of the decade. It was a big deal – if for no other reason than that we hear about the registry about 4 or 5 different times in the first few verses of our reading alone. Luke talks and talks and talks about the census. The emperor issues this order, and all of a sudden, everyone in the entire country has to pretty much drop everything to go travel to their hometown to be counted.

And this was no small feat. Because this was long before the time of airplanes or motorized vehicles. You couldn't just hop in the car and drive 3 hours to go put your name on a list and be home before dinnertime. For a lot of people, this would be a journey that would take them weeks, travelling by foot. It required planning, and preparation, neither of which they had much time for. Because when the emperor said "jump," the people did what the emperor said.

And the timing couldn't have possibly been worse for Mary and her fiancé Joseph. Because Mary was 9 months pregnant. When I was 9 months pregnant, Julia had managed to reach her little foot up into my ribcage and dislocated one of my ribs, and I had also developed bronchitis. And every time I would cough or even try to take a deep breath I would have this searing pain radiating through my whole torso. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't sleep, and just walking from the sofa to the kitchen took a *monumental* effort. And I got really judgey of big retail stores that didn't put maternity parking spots in their parking lots. Because walking hurt.

At the time I lived near Albuquerque NM, about 300 miles away from my hometown. If the US President had issued an order that I either walk 300 miles or ride 300 miles on the back of a donkey when just sitting up straight in a chair took just about all of the energy I had...I think I probably would have snapped. There are even some *airlines* that will not allow a woman who is 9 months pregnant to fly, because of the risk that she might go into labor on board the aircraft.

But the emperor did not make exceptions for women in their third trimester. So Mary and Joseph loaded up enough food and supplies for their journey. And somehow, this supermom managed to endure days and days and days of sciatic pain and lower back pain and swollen feet and headaches and Braxton Hicks contractions and a baby

practicing its soccer moves inside the womb, along with the unrelenting jolting, jarring *clop clop clop* of the donkey's hooves on the rocky path. With that incessant bouncing, poor Mary probably had to stop to pee just about every 5 minutes. Up and down, on and off the donkey while carrying about 40 extra pounds, never able to get comfortable.

Nazareth was about 90 miles away from Bethlehem – and it was a hard 90 miles. On even terrain in peak physical condition, occasionally people were able to travel as much as 20 miles in a day. But not Mary and Joseph. It was uphill and downhill, through desert and forest – a forest filled with lions and bears and wild boars, not to mention bandits, desert pirates, and robbers. Probably the most the couple would have been able to travel in a single day – especially with Mary being pregnant – would have been about 10 miles or so. And that would have been a long day. So this journey on foot probably took a minimum of a week and a half. Probably more. With nothing to eat but dry bread.

I'm sure Mary had spent every waking moment of the journey dreaming about a nice, comfortable hotel bed that she could lie down in the moment she got to Bethlehem. But when one Inn after another, after another, declared that they were full and then finally one Innkeeper told the couple that the best he could do was let them sleep in the barn out back, that would've been it for me. Raging hormones, mixed with physical pain, mixed with dashed expectations and deep disappointment, mixed with fear – this being her first pregnancy and all – mixed with absolute exhaustion, I probably would have been a sobbing mess, even before the contractions started.

I absolutely love the way Barbara Brown Taylor imagines the scene:

This is the moment is when the Christmas card pictures are taken: when the star is overhead and angels are singing and shepherds are shivering with awe. But twenty minutes later, the hole in heaven closes up and the only music happening is coming from the bar at the Inn. And Mary does her best to clean up after a not-so-sanitary birthing experience, and then as soon as she gets the baby to sleep one of the cows in the nearby stall steps on the toe of one of the roosters and the resulting racket makes the baby cry again. And as Mary leans over to pick him up she starts crying too. And when Joseph tries to comfort her she tells him she wants her mom. She tells herself that if she had just married a nice boy from Nazareth she would be back home where she belonged, instead of competing with the cows for a place to sleep. And then she feels sorry and apologizes to Joseph for crying, and he patiently brushes the hair from her eyes. And they both hurt all over and there is nothing to eat and it is cold. But you know what? God is there. Right in the middle of all of it. Literally there. With eyes and ears and skin that feels the cold. And also a name. Jesus.

The Christmas story is such a powerful story – not just because it marks the birth of Christ – marking the earliest foundations of our life in Christ. Not just because of the miracle in the story – that God would choose to take on flesh and blood and come to walk the earth as one of us. Both of these things are true, of course. The Christmas story

grounds our faith and profoundly deepens our relationship with a God who would (and did) move heaven and earth to be in deeper relationship with us. And that is critical for us as Christians.

But this story is also powerful because it is so real, and so relatable. And it invites us to ask the question: what do we do when things don't go as planned? How do we respond when either God changes our picture of what life is going to look like, or life takes an unexpected twist and all of a sudden everything is upside-down?

Mary and Joseph no doubt had lots of plans and hopes and dreams for their life together when they got engaged. But nowhere in Joseph's plans did being the stepdad of God enter in.

Mary had planned for a nice, easy, uneventful pregnancy. She never in her wildest dreams thought that she's be forced to take a long, treacherous journey at 38 weeks pregnant. Her birthing plan had no doubt included, at the very least, a bed and a midwife. Not straw and the smell of cow poop.

And that was just the beginning of it. When it is time to pack up and finally go home, God warns the couple in a dream that if they go home King Herod's henchmen will be there to kidnap and kill the newborn baby. So when all Mary wants to do is to go home and sleep in her own bed after a traumatic birth experience, when her postpartum hormones are flying in a thousand different directions at once, when she is so tired she is hardly seeing straight because...hello, newborn baby is up at all hours of the night, when she just wants to settle down into life with her new husband and her tiny baby boy, she has to load back up on that donkey and travel not 90 miles back to Nazareth, but roughly 260 miles into a foreign country – to Egypt – with no idea how long they would be there. Jesus was 3 years old before King Herod finally died and the family was able to go home again.

With everything that she had to go through, Mary totally deserves the mom of the year award. And I hope that she got a whole lot of chocolate on her first Mother's Day, because if ever anybody deserved it, she did. I can't even imagine.

But you know what? Isn't that life? We make plans; we have dreams; we have an idea in our heads about what we want life to look like; we surround ourselves with things and people that comfort us; we work hard for what we have; and then, something happens. The hot water heater breaks. Or the transmission goes out on the car. Or an unplanned pregnancy happens. Or a pandemic throws the world into a tailspin. Or a teenage boy is killed in a car wreck. And all of a sudden, life isn't what we imagined anymore. And all we want is to go back to the way things used to be. We want to go back to Nazareth where things made sense, but God is telling us to go to Egypt instead.

But here's the truth: no matter where our path takes us; whether we are in safety at home in Nazareth, or in a barn in Bethlehem, or way off in Egypt where we don't even understand the language that people are speaking, God is there.

God is here with us. Giving us strength to do what needs to be done; bringing us comfort when all we want to do is to curl up in a little ball and cry; giving us wisdom to discern the next step that we are being called to take; giving us moments of delight and joy even in the midst of the uncertainties that surround us. God is here, in the cries of a baby and in the seemingly boundless energy of children. God is here, in the tears of those who sit and cry with us. God is here, helping us to bear the burdens that we carry, and giving us the courage to change course when necessary. God is here when we are exhausted and have nothing left, and God is here when we are feeling parched and dry and are longing for the living waters to come and flood over us. God is here when we are lonely, and when we are disappointed, and when we are frustrated, and when we are angry, and when we are afraid.

God is here. Now. In this moment. Feeling what we feel; knowing what we think; and taking upon himself that which we carry. And because God is with us, no matter what crazy twists and turns life throws our way we will never be alone. And there will be within us a strength that is not our own, that helps us face whatever comes our way.