

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
December 5, 2021 – Elizabeth Bryce**

Reading: Ezekiel 37:21-27

Sermon: Walking to Bethlehem

How long would it take for you to walk from here to the place where you were born? Is it even physically possible? Would you have to climb a mountain or cross a river – would you have to swim or maybe sail across an ocean? How many political borders would you have to cross?

I was born in Cornwall ON, so it's doable – I might need to camp out a night or two, but with a good pair of shoes, I think I could do it. My partner Paul was born in Nova Scotia and my two daughters were born in Saskatchewan – so they would have long, long journeys to get to their birthplace. We would be separated for many months. Luke would only have to walk to the General Hospital.

My feet already hurt at the thought of walking from Ottawa to Cornwall, a distance of about 80 or 90 kilometres, travelling by the highway, of course.

Can you imagine that journey for Joseph and Mary from Nazareth in the northern part of Palestine, all the way to Bethlehem, much further south by the Jordan river? The distance as the crow flies is about 160 kilometres, though it might have been farther given the landscape and a route that avoided Samaritan territory. Granted, Mary and Joseph took long journeys on foot for granted, they were not accustomed as we are to driving and flying long distances.

But why did they go to Bethlehem? What was special about a town so small that it didn't even have decent hotels?

Tradition says that Joseph was returning to either his birthplace or his ancestral homeland in order to be registered in the famous census that had been called by the emperor Augustus. That's a quote from the gospel of Luke. I'm sure there are a couple dozen young people from RPUC who could quote that verse to you by heart. Mary and Joseph were FROM Nazareth, and somehow they ended up travelling TO Bethlehem, right at the time when Mary should have been at home in the bosom of her family, giving birth to her first-born.

But according to the word of the Hebrew prophets, the saviour was to be born in Bethlehem. Whether the emperor Augustus called a census or not, somehow the prophets just knew that the Messiah would end up in Bethlehem.

When the Magi appeared from the East, knocking on King Herod's door, asking where to find the child born to be King of the Jews, Herod called for his advisors. They quoted

him the prophecy of Micah: “from you (Bethlehem) shall come a ruler, one who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

Micah’s prophecy is confirmed again by the prophet Ezekiel in the passage we heard read today. Ezekiel didn’t name the town of Bethlehem specifically, instead he spoke about Israel, the descendants of Jacob, someday having a ruler like King David. David came from Bethlehem, from the tribe of Judah – and so it was believed that the new saviour, whether he be king or shepherd or messiah, must arise out of Bethlehem in order to fulfill the prophets’ word – whether it be the proclamation of the prophet Micah or Isaiah or Zechariah or Ezekiel.

If the people of God wanted a leader as faithful as David, they needed to place their hope in the house of David and find their new leader there.

Not that David was perfect, he wasn’t. He didn’t always listen to God, and he made a big mess of his family relationships.

Not that Bethlehem was the perfect place to be raising a messiah either – after all, we know that Jesus spent more time in Egypt and Galilee than he did in Bethlehem.

Not that the first century friends and followers of Jesus really cared that he was born in Bethlehem. The gospels of Mark and John don’t even mention Bethlehem as part of Jesus’ biography. The disciples were attracted to Jesus because of his spiritual power, not the place where his life story began.

However, in the first century after Jesus’ birth, as people began to put together the pieces of Jesus’ story, Bethlehem arose as one of the indicators of Jesus’ messianic identity. Early Christian writers like Matthew and Luke scoured the words of the ancient prophets to justify Jesus’ importance and to understand his identity. That Jesus had been raised in the house of Joseph, and Joseph was a member of the tribe of Judah, and a descendant of King David himself – that fact made all the pieces fall in place for the gospel writers. It confirmed for them that Jesus was the one that God’s people had been waiting for for centuries.

The prophets’ ability to read the signs of the times and to find their hope in God even in the worst moments of Israel’s history meant that the prophets were bigger heroes in the history of God’s people than any king or judge or ruler.

Unfortunately, for the people of God, too often it was their hindsight that was 20/20. They weren’t known for actually listening to a prophetic voice when it was in their midst.

I said a couple of weeks ago that Amos was one of the grumpy prophets. Well, if Amos was grumpy, I think Ezekiel is probably best described as “scorched earth.” Ezekiel spared no colours when he was painting a description of God’s wrath against Israel. Long before the Roman empire, God was angry at the people for making their own prosperity a higher priority than caring for the vulnerable in their midst. Ezekiel had a

special painful place in his condemnation for the king, who appeared to be more interested in securing diplomatic ties with wealthier nations than finding ways for God's people to live as a more faithful nation.

Ezekiel's scorched earth prophecies include chapter 7 when he proclaimed *"disaster comes upon disaster, rumour follows rumours, they shall keep seeking a vision from the prophet, instruction shall perish from the priest, and counsel from the elders. The king shall mourn, the prince be wrapped in despair and the hands of the people of the land shall tremble. According to their own judgements, I will judge them. And then they shall know that I am the Lord."* Ezekiel 7:26-27

I think that gives you a sense of how deeply and passionately Ezekiel felt about the gap between God and the nation.

When the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem and Babylon finished Judea off, when the people truly were living in a literal scorched earth, did Ezekiel say "I told you so."?

No, Ezekiel reached down even deeper into his passionate paint-box and he painted a picture of how the world might be, if only the people of God would place God at the centre, and let everything else fall into place.

For Ezekiel, this meant returning to leadership that would be faithful to God - the way that King David had once been faithful. Yes, David was human, fallible and downright wrong at times, but he always returned to God when choosing a path for the nation.

For Ezekiel, the hope and peace of Israel meant following God's leading, and thereby transforming the way the nation ran. "They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and detestable things, or with any of their transgressions... then they shall be my people, and I shall be their God." (37:23-24). "I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant and I will bless them and multiply them and will set my sanctuary among them for evermore." (37:26)

Ezekiel returned to his own spiritual birthplace in order to give the people hope. He reminded them of a simpler time, a deeper faith, a stronger community, and a more humble leader.

When the world shatters us, with death and war, disease and catastrophe, Ezekiel reminds us that all we can do is return to that spiritual birthplace, and to the one who gives us life. All we can do is return home.

Ezekiel prophesied hope to his people by calling them home to God.

Maybe that is what Joseph was doing too when his relationship with Mary took such a dramatic turn from happy engagement into complete confusion. Joseph returned to his roots in Bethlehem, and then he and Mary would start over with a new understanding of their place in the world.

Many of us have different emotional ties to the place of our birth. My family moved away from Cornwall before I was even 18 months old.

My daughters barely remember living in Saskatchewan, and though I like to call them stubble-jumpers, they just roll their eyes and only show their Saskatchewan pride when the Riders win a game (which we hope they will do this afternoon.)

Paul is, of course, a profoundly loyal blue-noser and identifies as a maritimer, even though he has lived outside of the province for many more years than he lived in it. He probably would walk there on foot if that was the only way to get home.

But the one thing we all share is that all of us are born in God's grace and love, wherever we may live. This common root system is the rationale for our Christian compassion, it is our game plan for peace between the nations, it is our recipe for generous hearts and a faith that leads us to action.

May we always remember our spiritual birthplace in God, and may every step we take lead us closer to home. Amen