

AN UNIMAGINABLE JOURNEY

Sunday 7 December 2008

Advent 2: St Mary's Episcopal Church, Castleton

It is hard for us to imagine what Mary went through at the time of the birth of Jesus. She had become pregnant through what were quite obviously very mysterious circumstances, both in her estimation and no doubt in the estimation of those around her. Her fiancée Joseph simply had to rely on a dream or vision he had as to the fact that this baby, of all the babies of history, was coming not from a man and a woman, but directly from God. As he worked away making his tables and chairs, might he not have sometimes doubted his own sanity? Try for a moment to put yourself into the position of Mary, or of Joseph, or of their neighbors.

What if a young woman who was a neighbor of yours told you that her pregnancy was from an angel? And what if her fiancée told you that he agreed? What would you think?

Mary and Joseph did not even have a congregation of fellow believers with whom they could discuss the whole thing. If they had gone to the local synagogue, they would have been ridiculed. It was just the two of them.

And then the birth – imagine a journey by foot, a journey of about a week from Nazareth to Bethlehem. By foot, immediately before the delivery of the baby! I have done a walk of about that length, and it was no joke. I cannot imagine what

it would have been like for Mary to take a journey like that being heavily pregnant, one week away from delivering a child. It is very hard to imagine.

But there is more. Imagine giving birth in the parking lot of a hotel, say, the parking lot of Staten Island Hotel. And then, imagine having the equivalent of local service station workers show up in the middle of the night to sing the praises of this strange child. Imagine having government agents – the CIA, FBI, and the police -- actively searching for the baby in order to kill it, to prevent any challenging to the reigning governor.

It is all really almost unimaginable, and apocalyptic. But there is still more. Imagine having to escape to another country, with very little or nothing, just to survive. In escaping, Joseph would have kissed goodbye to his carpentry business, and the couple cannot have had much by way of savings to rely on.

Our times today are very difficult, no doubt. The news this week, with hundreds of thousands of job losses was dreadful. But let's face it, there is nothing remotely as difficult for us as there was for Mary and Joseph, at the time of the birth of Jesus.

On Advent 2, we remember John the Baptist – who, even in the womb, was perhaps the very first to acknowledge Jesus, doing so with a leap of joy. We have been baptized into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit -- and God hears what we promise in solemn moments like that. We see Mary as the first Christian. Our baptism, death and resurrection, sooner or later draws us into the death and resurrection we accepted, and which Mary accepted. Our

baptism calls us to follow in the footsteps of Mary and Joseph, and to follow their example.

To be a follower of Jesus is never going to make us more comfortable. Rather, one way or another, to follow Christ tends to overturn or even remove everything predictable and comfortable in our lives. It tends to place us in circumstances which are surprising, mysterious, embarrassing, threatening, and extremely demanding. It places us on a road where we cannot see the outcome, or have any hard evidence for it. It places us on a road on which we sometimes feel we could die at any moment. The single thread by which we are often guided is by that whispering, almost dreamlike sense of those things to which God is calling us.

Are there circumstances in your life which are making you feel overwhelmed? There certainly have been in mine. Perhaps these are the very circumstances through which we experience or taste something of the great difficulty that the return of the Jews from exile to the promised land meant in our Isaiah 40 reading; or the great difficulty Christmas story meant to Mary and Joseph.

Perhaps these very challenging circumstances are the door through which the grace of God is coming to you and me, and to those around us. It is possible. If we can possibly walk through our particular flood in faith, step by step, in prayerful faith, hope, and love, in due course we will see the deliverance of God.

Amen.