

TRAVELLING AT CHRISTMAS

ISAIAH 9:2-7

LUKE 2:1-14

ADVENT IV 2017

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LINUS WAS FRUSTRATED WITH HIS FRIEND, CHARLIE BROWN

All of us familiar with "A Charlie Brown Christmas"...-and who isn't?- know why. The story opens with Charlie confessing to his friend that he is not happy, that he feels depressed. He knows he should be happy at Christmas time but he's sad. "I guess I just don't understand Christmas", he tells Linus.

"Charlie Brown, only you could turn a wonderful season like Christmas into a problem!" Of all the Charlie Browns in the world, you're the Charlie Browniest! Well, Charlie wasn't the first to have a problem at Christmas time. As the very first Christmas approached, God Himself had a problem.

THE PROPHECY DICTATED THAT THE MESSIAH WAS TO BE BORN IN BETHLEHEM OF JUDEA.

Joseph and Mary however lived in Nazareth of Galilee, some 7 days journey to the north. Mary was almost ready to give birth, so travel was out of the question. Out of the question unless something forced Joseph and Mary to go on a risky journey they would otherwise not undertake. But who on earth had enough power to compel Joseph to travel at this crucial time? Of course, God thought, Octavian, or as he called himself these days "The August One" Emperor of Rome, Savior of the World.

But what would motivate Augustus to do such a thing? It didn't take a God to know the answer to that-money. And so it happened that Joseph was forced to take a journey he didn't want to take, to pay a tax he didn't want to pay.

WITH MUCH FEAR AND TREMBLING, THE YOUNG COUPLE SET OUT FOR BETHLEHEM OF JUDEA.

No doubt Anne, Mary's mother, had given her instructions about what would signal an imminent birth. No doubt Joachim, Mary's father had prepped Joseph as well. It would not be a pleasant trip. The couple never felt more vulnerable in all their lives.

A smile broke onto Joseph's face as he saw Bethlehem in the distance. They made it! Now, if they can just find lodgings-but alas, it's Christmas and all the motels are booked. A kindly inn keeper allows them to use the place in which he shelters his guests' animals. It's a bit noisy and smelly, but it's out of the elements-and private.

Joseph hurries off to find a midwife who returns just in time to assist with the birth. And so it was that the Son of God, the Creator of the Universe, was born in an animal shelter, wrapped as all babies were, in strips of cloth, but laid in a feed trough, in the city of David-just as the prophet Micah had foretold.

Caesar has his new tax, Mary and Joseph have their firstborn son, and the world has its long-awaited Savior. Mary and Joseph rejoice and quietly celebrate the gift of heaven, so silently given.

THE ANGELS IN HEAVEN, HOWEVER, WERE FAR FROM HAPPY.

They wanted some spectacular display to signal and celebrate this monumental birth. Some lobbied for a comet streaking across the sky, one so bright so as to make the moon pale to insignificance. Others wanted God to send a 9 magnitude earthquake to shake the 7 hills of Rome to their very foundations, toppling the pagan temples and sending Augustus sprawling onto his marble bedroom floor- as if to say so much for Caesar's claim to be the world's Savior, so much for Rome's claim to be the agent of world peace.

Michael the Archangel wanted to lead the heavenly host to march on the capital city. But even the ways of angels are at times at odds with God's ways. He remains a mystery even to the angelic host which serves Him.

GOD SUMMONS THE HEAVENLY HOST TO HIS THRONE.

He selects gentle Gabriel the messenger, not Michael the warrior, to lead a not a legion but a choir of angels to the earth. They are to proclaim His son's birth, announcing it to the world. God hands Gabriel a little scroll on which are written both the message, the recipients of the message, and the place where the announcement of this supreme good news is to be made. Gabriel doesn't even look; he knows where all this must take place and to whom the message is to be given: Rome of course, and to the Emperor in the presence of the entire Roman Senate.

As Gabriel and the heavenly host near the Appian Way, God sends the angel Michael to tell Gabriel that he is going in the wrong direction. Gabriel stops, looks at the scroll, and cannot believe his eyes. Bethlehem, the destination? Shepherds, the recipients of the message? Ridiculous...that would be like inviting the King to your home and making him enter by the back door.

Gabriel was stunned. He shook his angelic head and quoted Isaiah: truly God's ways are not our ways.

AND SO IT WAS THAT GOD SOLVED HIS PROBLEM.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem as He had promised long ago- Bethlehem, a town important only to God. Appropriately enough the announcement was made to unsavory shepherds-people important only to God. The announcement was equally unexpected. God had sent a Savior into the world to save people many of whom... were important only to God, many of whom were of no account, all of whom were invisible to the Caesars of the world.

AND YET GOD STILL HAD A PROBLEM.

The good news must be spread. The world must hear it. God solves his problem by sending the shepherds first to Bethlehem and then throughout

the hill country of Judea. Later God will dispatch simple fishermen, tenant farmers, and the occasional tax collector to do the same. Even a tent maker would be called upon. The good news would go forth not from Rome but from Bethlehem. Not from the seat of power but from power's footstool. It would go first to the poor and downtrodden, and only later to wealthy, the powerful, and the comfortable-in a totally unexpected reversal of the ways of the world.

TODAY IS THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT.

Tomorrow we will once again celebrate the birth of the King of the Jews, who became the Savior of the World. **The Gospels tell of this babe born in a manger who grew up to proclaim the coming rule of God-which is in effect the promised salvation.**

God's methods of establishing His rule on earth are as shocking to us as His methods of announcing the birth were to the angels in heaven.

- God enters the world as a vulnerable baby, signaling that He will establish his kingdom not through force but through vulnerable love.
- He will establish his kingdom not by killing his enemies but by dying for them.
- He will give the places of honor in his kingdom to those who serve and put the welfare of others before their own.
- He will however make room even for the rich and powerful, the comfort seekers and path-of-least-resisters, the self-absorbed and the narrow-minded. You see Christmas proclaims that God is merciful, and that there is "a wideness in God's mercy" that not even the angels in heaven can comprehend.

Mary and Joseph made a long journey before that first Christmas day. It was in fact a sign of sorts. It pointed to the very long journey God has made to earth in order to save His creation from sin and death. There is no distance God will not travel to recover his lost sheep. There is no mountain God will not climb to bring home the prodigal.

These are the glad tidings of great joy which will be for all people. And the angels sing, "God has blessed us, every one!"

