

Sermon for Sunday, November 29, 1981 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D. Pastor
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ROADS THAT LEAD TO BETHLEHEM
"The Road that Mary and Joseph Took"
St. Luke 2:1-7

Text: "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David...." St. Luke 2:4

When you get right down to it, an awful lot of people ended up going to Bethlehem. Since today is the first Sunday in Advent, I thought it might be interesting for us this year to take a look at some of the people who went to Bethlehem. Advent has four Sundays in it before we come to Christmas. So in the next four Sundays we will be looking at people who traveled to Bethlehem. Then, on Christmas Eve, there is one final person who took the road to David's town that we will think about together.

Today as we begin our journey on Bethlehem's road, we are going to look at Mary and Joseph. After all, they are the ones who come to mind first when we talk about going to Bethlehem. They are the central players in the drama that was to unfold there.

Let's talk about Mary first. If you were God and you were going to have your son born on earth through a human mother, how would you go about selecting her? That's an interesting question, don't you think? Let's suppose you are a single parent and you must give your only child up for adoption. What would you look for in the prospective parents? What would be the first thing you looked for? Would it be that they were well-educated? Would you want them to have a lovely home? Would you want them to be financially fixed? Would you want them to have a good background? And where would you want them to live? In a city--in the country--a small town? When you stop to think about it, there seem to be a lot of things we would want those perspective parents to have.

But when you stop to think about it Joseph and Mary didn't qualify on any of those grounds. That being the case, what was there about them that led God to chose them? Of all of the women before her and all that came after her, what was there about Mary that God found her a suitable mother to give birth to His Son?

As nearly as I can tell, there is only one clue. It is found in Chapter 1 of St. Luke, verse 30. There the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary and says, "you have found favor with God." Let me ask you this question: how does one find favor with God? I was sure the Bible would have an answer to that question and I did a little research. I found the answer in Proverbs 8:32-35. There we read, "...happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord." Does that last sentence strike a familiar note? Proverbs says, "he who finds me finds life..." and Jesus said, "he who loses his life for my sake shall find it."

So to have favor with God means to be God's person. He listens to God, watches daily at God's gates, waits beside God's door. Well, if Mary found favor with God, that must have been the kind of person she was. Let's pose this question to ourselves this morning. Could God send us to Bethlehem? That is to say, have we found favor with God? When I look at my own life, I have to admit that I don't always listen to God. I don't always watch daily at his gates. I am not always waiting beside his doors. Are you?

I suspect a lot of us are eager to see God act in our day and time. Many of us would like to see a great spiritual renewal sweep America. Many of us would like to see God raise up some spiritual giants in our time. Could it be that God is waiting for men and women who have found favor with him? I'm not so sure I'm qualified to be sent to Bethlehem. Do you feel qualified? And how can God act without some modern Marys and Josephs?

When the angel first appeared to Mary, do you remember what he said? He said, "...the Lord is with you." One commentator says that means that Mary was saved--she was redeemed--she had a saving relationship to the Lord. Well, I know a lot of people here this morning have that saving relationship. A lot of us this morning have the Lord with us in the sense that we are redeemed. But Mary had gone on to spiritual maturity--she had gone on to so live her life that she had found favor with God. How shall we describe that? Can we say she went from forgiven to favored? Have we done that? Many of us have found forgiveness with God, but have we moved on in our spiritual lives to find favor with God?

Do you know what happens when a person finds favor with God? Well, the angel told Mary that God had a plan for the world--a wonderful plan. He told her, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High... and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 2:32,33) And to be in favor with God meant Mary could be a part of that plan. The angel said, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus."

What is God's plan for our world today? I don't know about you, but whatever that plan is, I want to be a part of it. Oh, how I long to be a part of God's mighty move in our day? But I can't be a part of that plan unless I am in favor with God. I can't be a part of that plan unless I have moved on from forgiveness to favor, from being born again to being mature in the Lord. And neither can you.

Can you think of any person in the Bible that God used in a powerful way--can you think of any person in the Old or New Testament that became a great spiritual leader, an instrument in God's hands, who did not first reach spiritual maturity? Look at St. Paul for example. Paul got converted on the road to Damascus. But do you realize it was fourteen more years before God felt he was spiritually mature, until Paul found favor with God, so that God could send him out on the first missionary journey?

Well, God can't send spiritual babes to Bethlehem. He needs people who have found favor with him. But there was a second thing that happened when the angel visited Mary. When the angel told her what God proposed to do, do you remember what Mary said? She said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word". (Luke 1:38) The time had come for Mary to make a response to God. You know, God never forces people to do his

will. God never forces people into situations without their agreement, without their decision. Suppose Mary had said, "no" to God. She had that choice. It is unthinkable to believe that the Holy Spirit would have come upon her without her consent. God never works that way. But Mary put herself at God's disposal that day. "Let it be to me according to your word," she said.

Are you at God's disposal this morning? Are you ready to set out on some road to Bethlehem? I like to think I am. But then I read a passage like this, "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." (Matthew 25:42ff) And when I read that, I realized God is speaking to me about my failure to be at his disposal. Do you have that problem, too?

God isn't going to force any of us, is he? God isn't going to make any of us do anything we don't want to do any more than he would have forced Mary to do his will. But God didn't need to force Mary--no, she put herself at his disposal.

You see, we may be forgiven, and we may even be favored, but God can't use us in his plan for the world unless we are at his disposal. And it is not only true of us individually, but it is true of us as a congregation. I can't help but believe God has favored Central and blessed us beyond any congregation I know about. But the real question is this: are we as a congregation at God's disposal to do his will? Well, are we?

But let's turn for a moment and say a word about Joseph. We don't know much about Joseph. While Jesus is still a boy Joseph disappears from the scene. By the time Jesus begins his ministry, there is no mention of Joseph and we may assume he has died. But let me tell you how important Joseph was. In those days it would have been utterly impossible for an unmarried woman to have a child. She would be stoned to death. So God needed some kind and loving man to put the shield of his name around the woman God chose. Could you have done that? Could you have trusted some dream enough to do that? Could you have believed such an incredible dream and done what Joseph did? It would be hard, wouldn't it?

One writer puts it this way, "Joseph does not delay. He does not dispute. He does not disobey. In an act of obedience quite similar to that of Mary he embraces the divine directive and puts the shelter of sanctity over her head: he takes her to be his wife but he knows her not until she gives birth to her firstborn son. And in doing so the prophetic Scriptures are fulfilled." (Harold Lindsell, Christianity Today, December 9, 1977).

Yes, an act of obedience. Do you think there may be some road to Bethlehem today that God wants you and me to travel? In my heart I know there are great things God wants to do in our world today through people like us. But before God can send people off on that road he needs men and women who have found favor with him, who put themselves at his disposal, and who are obedient.

Mary and Joseph were ready to go to Bethlehem. Am I? Are you?