

"THE GEOGRAPHY OF JESUS: Jerusalem to the Unknown Future"

Isaiah 2:1-5 Matthew 24:36-44

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Many of us have traveled this road to Advent for as long as we can remember. It is a well-worn path and a familiar story. We know the characters as well as we know our own families. Even though it is nice to hear it again each year- because it is a pretty amazing story-- sometimes I wonder what part of it haven't we heard before- what part of it do we need to hear in a different way? This year during Advent and Christmas we are going to look closely at the "Geography of Jesus."

- Where are people going to and coming from in the story of Jesus' birth?
- What is the significance of the starting and ending points?
- Why do people have to travel so much in this story?

We put a map in your bulletin- so you can see that the places we are talking about are real places. They have an actual location on this earth. Real people lived there and live there still. Everything about the location matters and affects the story- the climate, the topography, the population, the distances, the politics, the religion, the history, and the customs. All of it makes the people we will meet who they are.

This morning, on the first Sunday of Advent, we begin in Jerusalem and our destination is "God's Unknown Future." That may seem like an odd destination. Just try plugging that one into your GPS or looking for it on Google Earth. It seems odd but it is actually found everywhere in the Bible. I know I have said this many times in sermons- but it is true so I will say it again. God never allows God's people to stay in one place for very long. God's people are always called to move forward- sometimes physically, always spiritually. The people we meet in scripture are always on their way to someplace else because God is always doing a new thing.

Sometimes they are moving into exile and sometimes into freedom. Sometimes they are traveling on the road to Jericho or Emmaus or through the wilderness or to the Promised Land.

Sometimes they know where they are going but often they do not. And even if they know the physical location on the map they often have no idea why they are going there or what it will mean for them. And yet, they still go. Sometimes they argue with God about it.

Sometimes they pretend like they didn't hear the directions. Sometimes they refuse to go at all but that doesn't mean they get to stay where they are.

So lace up your traveling shoes, sisters and brothers , over the next several weeks we are going to be hitting the road with God. We have our scriptural roadmap and we have each other- what more do we need?

We begin today in the holy city of Jerusalem. (Find it on your map.) Has anyone ever been there? That city is named over and over again in the Bible and even in our news today. It was and is a holy site for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Jesus was dedicated in the Temple when he was an infant. He visited again with his parents for Jewish festivals throughout his childhood, most notably when he was twelve and stayed behind to school the religion teachers.

There was one Temple in Jerusalem- one Temple in the whole world- and it was the home of God. It was a sacred and holy place. In Jesus' day the whole Temple compound was as large as ten football fields. Although there was only one Temple there were many synagogues- at least 480 of them in Jerusalem at that time. Synagogues were small, local structures used as religious and social meeting places.

To the south of the Temple was the Lower City where the working class and poor people lived. To the west was the Upper City, home to wealthy Jewish families and Roman officials. A high, thick, stone wall about four miles in circumference encircled the whole city and its 25,000 inhabitants.

The Lower City was a bustling place of one and two-story homes crowded closely together with the open-air shops of potters, tailors, bakers, weavers, carpenters, and metal workers. Colorful bazaars sold fruits and vegetables, clothes, jewelry, and sacrificial animals for the Temple. It was a busy place full of the sounds and smells of people and animals. The only day the streets were empty was the Sabbath. Taverns and restaurants served fish, fried locusts, vegetables, fruit, and pastries. On the outskirts farmers tended their olive trees which produced the city's only major export- olive oil.

The homes in the Upper City were more spacious and made of expensive marble. They had elaborate gardens. The shops in this part of Jerusalem sold luxury goods- expensive perfumes, fine silk garments, gold and silver jewelry inlaid with precious stones. Household slaves did the grocery shopping for the fine banquets thrown by their masters.

This is where we begin with Jesus and his disciples. They are in the Temple and have been every day since they arrived in the city. Jesus is just a few days away from death. He has cemented the opposition against him by throwing the cheating merchants out of the Temple. Still he goes there every day to teach and to heal. He has argued- more than

once- with the various religious leaders and he always leaves them speechless and angry. He has even told them that their magnificent Temple would be destroyed. So of course, the disciples want to know when this is going to happen. They want to know so they can get ready, be prepared, and probably be as far away from Jerusalem as possible when it happens.

By now they should know that Jesus doesn't make things that easy for them. So when they ask, "Tell us, what will be the signs of your coming and the end of the age?" he goes into a long explanation that has confounded theologians and people in the pews ever since.

Remember, I said that context is very important. So let's look at the context of Matthew's writing. According to Thomas Long, *The Gospel of Matthew was not originally written to be a book in the Bible. It was intended instead to be a resource for a particular congregation- a group of worshiping, serving, praying, striving Christians. Matthew wrote to speak to a very immediate and urgent congregational crisis. His original readers were wrestling with how to be faithful to Jesus Christ in a changing world and in difficult circumstances. (1)*

Written only a generation after Jesus's death and resurrection, these Jewish Christians were expecting his imminent return. He said he was coming back, so where was he? It was a time of political and religious upheaval, the Temple had been destroyed, their world was going crazy so they put all of their hope in Christ's triumphant return.

The writer of Matthew sees history divided into two ages- the present, evil age and God's new age in the future. He, like other New Testament writers, believed that Christ would return in his lifetime to take back God's world and God's people from the evil oppressors. But people were losing confidence. Jesus wasn't back yet. They didn't know how to live as faithful Christians in a time of such uncertainty. Matthew didn't write to scare his people but to help them to understand how to live as faithful witnesses to the Risen Christ. They are called to live in hope, not fear; to live expectantly, faithfully as followers of Jesus for as long as it takes.

The problem with reading scripture literally is that we have turned these words of hope into a terrifying road map of the end of the world and in doing so we have robbed it of its rich meaning.

So what, you may ask, does this have to do with Advent?

A wise person once said, *"The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters."* I would say, now is also the time of Advent. The season of Advent is *"an abrupt disruption in our ordinary time. It is a new season of the church year when we are at the brink of something utterly new, long yearned-for but beyond our capacity to enact. Advent incites us to awaken from our numbed endurance and our*

domesticated expectations, to consider our life afresh in light of new gifts that God is about to give." (2)

The season of Advent invites us to look back at the birth of Jesus and to look ahead at what God **is** doing and **will** do in the world; to look at where God is leading us.

Of course, Advent is the season that leads us to Christmas- but it is also the season that calls us to stop and to wait for God's new thing, to be aware of where God is at work in the world, and to join in that work of peace, justice, and well-being. God's people have been hoping for a very long time.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah leads the way in Advent. This prophet spoke God's anger that Jerusalem has become the center of national pride, self-centeredness, and self-serving religion. Isaiah condemns the holy city but he also lifts it up with tremendous hope. He makes a sharp contrast between what it is and what it will be.

Isaiah was God's prophet during a time of extreme political turmoil. There were wars and rumors of war. God's people had turned away from God and from each other. Isaiah's prophecy points to a world that is not yet a reality- but will be one day. It will be a time when God will mediate between nations so they will be at peace. They will turn their weapons of death into instruments of farming. They will not learn war anymore.

Isaiah issues an invitation and a road map - "*Come, let us walk in the light of God.*" To the people it was an absurd message- their enemies were preparing for war and they were supposed to prepare for peace?

But Isaiah was looking beyond the ways things are- to a future where God does something new and life-giving. He knows that the only way forward is with God.

Isaiah urges, "*Come, let us go to the mountain. Come, let us walk in the light.*" We are called to action. We are called to do something. For God's future to become reality we must make choices- personal, political, spiritual, communal; choices that will not only affect us, but will affect the whole world.

Walking into God's future is risky.

Isaiah's and Matthew's people were in Jerusalem- they knew what it looked like; what it smelled, tasted, and sounded like. It was an actual physical place; a dot on a map. They were being called to an unknown future- sure, they were told it was God's future- but what exactly did that mean when they were trying to survive from one day to the next? They were afraid and rightly so. But they were also given a promise- you will not walk alone.

We are given that same promise. We are living in between the old age and the new-between death and birth. And in this in-between time we are called to continue the work of Jesus- preaching and teaching the gospel, working for justice, freeing the prisoners, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting the lonely. We aren't supposed to sit around and count the days- we are to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ on this earth- in this place, this dot on the map.

It is time to pack our bags, dust off our passports, and step out in faith and promise.

Brothers and sisters, come, let us walk in the light of God!

Amen.

End Notes:

- MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. P. 1.
- TEXTS FOR PREACHING: Year A, edited by Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome. Westminster John Knox Press. 1995. P. 1.

Pastoral Prayer

We travel once again this road of Advent, Holy God, the road that will lead us to the birth of Jesus. Before we get to the stable, though, we have many other places to visit- places that are familiar and places that are foreign, places that are recognizable and places that are strange.

Instill in us a sense of adventure as we begin this Advent journey, so that we may travel with joy. Ignite in us your spark of curiosity so that we may travel with wonder. Embed in us your spirit of companionship so we may travel this journey together.

Help us to remember that we are the unknown future Christ's disciples could only dream about 2000 years ago. May we blaze a trail, as they did, so that we may lead the coming generations to Jesus' manger, and to his cross, and to his empty tomb.

We are grateful that you are both our guide and our map on this frustrating and fabulous, confusing and compelling journey through life. With Christ as our goal, we pray in his name. Amen.