

The First Christmas: The Journeys

(Christmas 2021)

Scripture

²¹On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

Jesus Presented in the Temple

²²When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took

him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

³³The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him. (Luke 2:21-40)

¹³When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." (Matthew 2:13)

Message:

Travel is as typical of the modern yuletide as Christmas itself. Kids are off from school and, if we're not visiting family or friends for the holidays, the expectation is we'll be traveling someplace. In our mobile society, our highways and airports are crowded each December. The Christmas carol, "*I'll be home for Christmas*," is not so much a promise, as it is a requirement. (Most of the staff has, is, or will be traveling during these days of Christmas.)

Travel also characterized the first Christmas. First, Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Then they would travel to church (actually, their local synagogue); a bit later, they would head to Jerusalem; and then they took a long excursion to Egypt. Meanwhile, there was an amazing journey of Magi from the East who trekked miles across desert to Judah and back again.

THE EXAMINATION

As we look at those details, we are again going to test your Christmas knowledge - this time, about the early travels of Jesus and his earthly parents.

- ___ 1. Eight days after he was born, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised according to the law. (True or False?)
- ___ 2. Jesus was officially named at his circumcision. (True or False?)
- ___ 3. Jesus, a form of Joshua, means, "God saves." (True or False?)
- ___ 4. Forty days after Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary went to the Temple and sacrificed an unblemished lamb for her purification. (True or False?)
- ___ 5. After Mary's purification, Joseph and Mary "*presented Jesus to the Lord*" - as required by law for all firstborn sons - and then bought him back. (True or False?)

- ___ 6. While in the Temple, a man came up to Joseph and Mary, and took the baby Jesus in his arms. (True or False?)
- ___ 7. While in the Temple, a prophetess named Anna came up to Joseph and Mary and gave thanks to God. (True or False?)
- ___ 8. Joseph left the same night the angel told him about Herod's plan to kill Jesus. (True or False?)
- ___ 9. There were many Jewish families in Egypt that Joseph and Mary could stay by. (True or False?)
- ___ 10. The sphinx and great pyramids had already been standing for 2500 years when Jesus arrived in Egypt.

Let's examine some of these questions and their answers together...

THE EXPLANATION

Eight days after his birth, Jewish law required that Jesus be circumcised. Circumcision was the symbol, the physical reminder, of a special covenant that God had made with his chosen people that went all the way back to Abraham (**Genesis 17:10ff**).

At this ceremony, the child was also given his formal name. This rite is one of the most important hallmarks in Judaism. Typically, the nearest rabbi would come to the home to perform the ceremony. But since Mary and Joseph were not living in their home, it is likely they took the infant to the nearby synagogue – there was no need to go to the Temple in Jerusalem. Normally the father of the son would ask to participate – like many fathers cut the umbilical cord today – and the rabbi would normally agree.

But this circumcision-naming ceremony was, like our baptisms are today, an occasion for great joy among parents, relatives, and friends. Because of the circumstances surrounding the birth and the location – far from their hometown, this was probably a small group – perhaps as small as Mary and Joseph, the baby and the nameless rabbi. The hosts where the family was staying may also have been in attendance. Together they would have celebrated that another son of Israel had been included in the great covenant with God.

The newborn child was also given a proper Biblical name. In this case, the name had been given to them by the angel – *“You are to call Yeshua, or Joshua”* – the same name of the leader who followed Moses. Yeshua, Joshua, or the Greek form, Jesus, means, *“God saves”* or *“God is salvation.”*

The baby would be uncomfortable for a few days have this “shedding of blood” - it would be a foreshadowing of the pain and bloodshed to come.

About **forty** days after his birth, the family would have packed Jesus up and headed out on the five to six mile trip to Jerusalem for Mary’sd **purification**. Again, the law (of Moses) required that women had to purify themselves after childbirth by making offerings at the Tabernacle, and now, in Jesus’ day, at the Temple. It was forty days after the birth of a son, eighty days after the birth of a daughter. It was, at minimum, a long one day round trip.

The magnificent Temple in Jerusalem was nearing completion at this time – a “gift” from Herod to try and placate the Jews. It was a gleaming white edifice wedged into the northeastern corner of the city. The sprawling enclave was rimmed with a labyrinth of colonnaded porticoes and gates. For pious Jews, it was the center of their faith and their world.

Purification required the sacrifice of an unblemished yearling lamb – again, the blood of a lamb was required to provide forgiveness, purification, and reconciliation. But Mary and Joseph, being poor, couldn’t afford an unblemished lamb, so they instead offered a pair of turtledoves (like our pigeons) (cf. **Leviticus 12:1-8**) – the minimum requirement according to the law (cf. **Luke 2:24**). Few knew at that moment, that Mary actually held in her arms the unblemished lamb that God provided for Mary (and Joseph, and the world’s purification).

Each family was also required to **dedicate** their **firstborn son** to God’s service to fulfill the law (cf. **Exodus 13:1-2** – “*Dedicate to me every first born...*”). This was called *Pidyon-haben* and according to **Numbers 3:13,15** took place after the newborn son was thirty days old. This ceremony underscores that Jesus was free of any bodily blemish (that is, he was now “certified” as being an *unblemished lamb* eligible to be sacrificed from one’s sin).

After he was “*dedicated to the Lord*,” the law allowed a family to “*buy him back*” (i.e., redeem him) for five shekels (**Num 18:16**) (at today’s exchange rate, that’s about \$1.50). In their place (that is, as their substitute), God accepts the service of Levites.

The ceremony of *redeeming* a firstborn son reminded the Jewish people of their redemption from slavery in Egypt (**Exodus 13:2-16**) and how they avoided the last of Ten Plagues to afflict the Egyptians - the slaughter of their firstborn sons (**Exodus 11:45, 12:29-30**) - by slaughtering a lamb in accordance with God’s command and placing its blood on the doorposts; on seeing the blood, the Angel of death passed over the Israelite family (**Exodus 12:3-14, 21-28**).

So Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem to present their first born son—the very lamb who would later be slaughtered in the shadow of the Temple; on seeing him “slaughtered” and his blood poured out, God would lift the “death sentence” from all who believed in him and are part of his family.

Up until this moment, Jesus had followed the pattern of every newborn Jewish son...and then thing got a bit interesting.

As Joseph and Mary are standing with their infant son in the Court of the Women in the Temple (cf. pic), a righteous and devote old man named Simeon approaches them. Simeon, Scripture tells us, had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah, the Christ. He had waited patiently for years – perhaps even decades. But with the prompting of the Spirit, he approaches Joseph and Mary. He explains, no doubt to their amazement, this arrangement he had with God. He takes the child in his arms and praises God:

*Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your Word;
For my eyes have seen your salvation
Which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)*

This benediction and its claims continue to ring through Christian history as one of the most beloved prayers of the Church.

Then Simeon turns to Joseph and Mary and blesses them, adding some specific words of prophecy to Mary:

*“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be spoken against
so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed
And a sword will piece your own soul too” (Luke 2:34-35).*

The text implies that a “sword” (the source of pain and bloodshed) will pass through the soul of both Jesus and his mother. The text tells the reader that Mary will participate in the events of the cross and her suffering will contribute to exposing “*the thoughts of many hearts.*” Will Mary’s faithful presence at the cross bring the enemies of Christ and evil forces to look at themselves and contrast their brutality with her courageous love?

Mary will remain to the end and witness the suffering of her son until his death. She was not under arrest; she could have walked away. She knew she could not change what was happening by arguing with the soldiers or pleading with the high priests – but she would not leave. The only decision she was free to make was to leave or remain and enter into Jesus’ suffering. She

chose the latter – as we all must. A sword passed through her heart, and in the process, once again, she becomes the model of Christian discipleship.

Simeon plays out his transitional role bringing together the Old and New Testament, prophecy and fulfillment, hope and reality.

As old as Simeon may have looked, he looked younger than elderly woman who followed him. Her name was **Anna**. She was a **prophetess** who had been hanging out in the Temple most of her life – and, depending on how you read and understand Luke (because he is not that clear here in the original language), she was either eighty-four (which is most likely), or she lived for eight-four years after her seven-year marriage (so she would be about 105!). Anna came from the tribe of Asher, meaning she was a “remnant” of the lost ten tribes of Israel. She forms the perfect female counterpart to Simeon. Her response to meeting Jesus is to give “thanks to God” and “speak of Him” to all who were looking for the “*redemption of Jerusalem*” (**Luke 2:38**).

For some reason, Luke was unable to find a faithful witness to the prophetic statements made by Anna – as he was with Simeon. Luke chooses not to fabricate a speech, so why is she mentioned at all? Because throughout his Gospel Luke emphasizes that Jesus makes it clear he came for both men and women – for all people. A careful examination of Luke’s Gospel finds at least twenty-seven sets of stories that focus in one case on a man and in next (other) case on a woman (e.g. Gabriel visits two persons: Zachariah and Mary; Two songs are recorded side by side: one by Zechariah, one by Mary; and here we have two witnesses: Simeon and Anna).

Shortly after Joseph and Mary return to Bethlehem after their amazing time at the Temple, their sense of **wonder** is compounded by a visit from **Magi** (More on that next Sunday as we get closer to Epiphany). It is no wonder that Mary treasured all these words (and events) of prophecy, encouragement, and comfort in her heart.

But when the Wise Men had left, the brimming happiness and excitement of that first Christmas was abruptly cut short. Joseph received another angelic visit in a dream – probably better described as a nightmare – warning Joseph that Herod was out to kill Mary’s first-born son. Without hesitating or waiting, Joseph roused his sleeping family, packed their meager belongings (and the providential gold they had received to finance the trip) and headed out on the highway south toward Hebron for Egypt. This is not a planned honeymoon; this is an emergency get-away that is more than **twice** the distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Scripture tells us nothing about the specific route they took, but the shortest - most direct - and the safest path was the regular caravan trail from Bethlehem, south on the Hebron Road, then sharply west to Gaza and the

Coastal Highway to Pelusium, the door to Egypt. At an average walk of twenty miles per day along the fairly level route, the journey down would have lasted about ten days.

We have seen in our study of this first Christmas, that wherever the Bible seems silent or offers us opportunities to embellish, tradition and legend become highly vocal. So, for example, the apocryphal *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy* tries to fill some of the details. The story is told of how Joseph and Mary were accosted by robbers on the Sinai Road, but they found nothing of value to steal from the poor couple. Taking pity on them, the robbers instead gave them provisions and sent them on their way. But the story continues. One of these benevolent bandits would cross Jesus' path again – thirty years later at Calvary – he was said to be the penitent thief on Jesus' right. (Possible, but highly unlikely.)

So where did they go? Where did they stay? There were myriads (an unknown number) of Jews living in Egypt at the time when Joseph and Mary would have sought refuge. For example, there were more Jews living in Alexandria than there were living in Jerusalem – more than forty percent of Alexandria was Jewish. And while it seems unlikely, they would have gone all the way west to the Nile delta, it underscores there was a **Jewish community** that would have taken them in and cared for them – another reminder of God's preparation and care. The place of their sojourn in Egypt is unknown; and...that's okay.

We do know that Joseph and Mary and Jesus were not in Egypt very long for Herod died soon after his dastardly deed of killing all the boy babies under two years of age.

Matthew then concludes his version of the Christmas story by telling of Joseph's fourth dream where the angel alerted Joseph to Herod's demise and told them to return to Palestine – fulfilling the prophecy, "*Out of Egypt I have called my son...*" (**Hosea 11:1**).

When Joseph and Mary returned to their homeland, an unhappy surprise awaited them. Herod was indeed dead, but his son, Archelaus ruled Judea as his successor. Archelaus had just started his reign by massacring three thousand Jews who had rebelled against him in the Temple at Jerusalem. It was better for them to return home to **Nazareth**, Galilee where a milder son of Herod, Herod Antipas, had been appointed tetrarch with the permission of the Roman emperor.

THE ELUCIDATION

- ___ 1. Eight days after he was born, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised according to the law. **(Not likely; usually the local synagogue; False; Luke 2:21)**
- ___ 2. Jesus was officially named at his circumcision. **(True)**
- ___ 3. Jesus, a form of Joshua, means, “God saves.” **(True)**
- ___ 4. Forty days after Jesus’ birth, Joseph and Mary went to the Temple and sacrificed an unblemished lamb for her purification. **(False; they offered a pair of doves, indicating they were poor)**
- ___ 5. After Mary’s purification, Joseph and Mary “*presented Jesus to the Lord*” - as required by law for all firstborn sons - and then bought him back. **(True)**
- ___ 6. While in the Temple, a man came up to Joseph and Mary, and took the baby in his arms. **(True; it was Simeon, Luke 2:28)**
- ___ 7. While in the Temple, a prophetess named Anna came up to Joseph and Mary and gave thanks to God. **(True) (Luke 2:38)**
- ___ 8. Joseph left the same night the angel told him about Herod’s plan to kill Jesus. **(True) (Matthew 2:14)**
- ___ 9. There were many Jewish families in Egypt that Joseph and Mary could stay by. **(True; and the hospitality would have been first class)**
- ___ 10. The sphinx and great pyramids had already been standing for 2500 years when Jesus arrived in Egypt. **(True)**

In his book, *Pilgrimage*, Richard Foster distinguishes between settlers and pilgrims. He defines a “**settler**” as a person who has **stopped moving**. A settler has solidified their ideas and attitudes and has settled down to live within their boundaries. The settler “settles” for a static view of the Christian life. Growth is unnecessary and too much work. While most believers don’t intend to become settlers, many – if not most - do.

Disciples of Jesus are called to be **pilgrims** – like Jesus. Pilgrims have at least three distinguishing qualities.

First, pilgrims are (always) on a journey. They are **constantly moving**. Like Abraham, they go where God calls when God calls. A pilgrim is always learning, always engaging in new experiences, always open to new ideas and

new challenges, always seeking to discern God's will in order to be obedient. A pilgrim longs to discover deeper truths, to grow in wisdom and understanding, and to widen their experience. In the first six months of his life, Jesus reminds us that life is a constant journey. Jesus had traveled to Jerusalem, to Egypt, and to Nazareth – before he was two years old. As a rabbi, he was constantly on the move. Listen to these words of Luke, *“And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.”*

Second, pilgrims have a destination in mind. Richard Peace says pilgrims are not like gypsies. Gypsies move for the sake of moving and return to the same place over and over; that is, they often go in circles. Pilgrims are always focused on a destination. Abraham set his sights on a land God promised to show him. Israel, freed from the bondage of Egypt, sets their sights on the promised land. Jesus, from the very beginning, sets his focus on the cross – on the sword that would pierce his soul. Disciples of Christ are constantly searching for *“a better country”* (**Hebrews 11:16**). Jesus set out for Jerusalem; pilgrims set out for the new Jerusalem (**Revelation 21:1-5**)

Third, pilgrims know there is a price to pay for the journey, and they are willing to pay the price for the sake of reaching their destination. Jesus suffered, we testify, throughout his whole life, but especially while on the cross (**cf. Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 37**). The journey is always challenging. Journeying forward almost always means leaving something behind – sometimes it is family, sometimes friends, sometimes our comfort and securities. The price can include breaking new ground, reaching beyond the ordinary, hardships and losses, and sometimes *“denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him.”*

For us, the spiritual journey is the **journey home** – to a **promised land**. Sometimes it leads through the wilderness, often into valleys and over mountains, sometimes through rough waters. But as followers of Jesus, we know he has walked this path before us; and now he walks the path with us. But if we are to reach the promised land, we must always be a **people** on a **journey**,

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