

Rev. Dan Welch Christmas Eve 12-24-20 Text- Luke 2: 1- 7 & 1 John 4: 7-16

“Christmas: Worth the Inconvenience”

How far would you **walk**, not drive, to pay your taxes? As far as the post office? How about walking as far as to the state capitol building in St. Paul? Sound pretty far-fetched? Yet that’s just about how far Joseph had to walk from his hometown of Nazareth to go to his family’s ancient hometown of Bethlehem. And the reason he had to make the journey with Mary, his fiancée, was so that his name could be recorded, and he would have to pay taxes to the Roman occupation forces! 85 miles. That’s actually about 20 miles farther than from Glencoe to our State Capitol. And all to pay the taxes! That’s what was happening on the first Christmas. That’s how God used a pagan Roman emperor to get Jesus’ family to Bethlehem, so that there He could be born to fulfill the prophecy spoken by the prophet Micah.

Now, how far would you travel to celebrate **Christmas**? Before this Christmas season is all said and done some people will have driven by car or flown by airplane hundreds of miles in order to spend time with their loved ones. I wonder how far you, or I, would travel if we had to **walk** all the way? Having to walk 85 miles kind of makes shelling out all of that money for presents, food, and gas for the car, or spending extra time at airport security seem not quite so bad. Those are the kinds of things we 21st century people complain about.

I think we’re all guilty of grumbling about the hassles we have to go through in life, especially this year and particularly at Christmastime. Truth be told, no matter how inconvenient things have been for us, Joseph had many more reasons to grumble about life than we do. Listen to Luke 2:4-5 once more in order to get Joseph’s point of view: “So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.” On a scale of 1 to 10, what kind of number would you assign as a “hassle factor” for Joseph? Did Joseph grumble about a long walk with a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy? We don’t know, but he went through a lot of hassle, that’s for sure, probably at least an 8 or 9 on a scale of 1 to 10. Have you or I grumbled sometime in these days about various jobs we have to do to get ready for Christmas? I know I have. It’s a lot of work to get ready for company, especially at Christmas. I love my family, but anytime you have to do a really good job cleaning the house and decorating for company it is a lot of work!

Well, complaining and grumbling before Christmas for whatever the reason is what make Charles Dickens' character Ebenezer Scrooge seem so real and relatable to us. I suspect there's more than a few of us who are tempted to be like Scrooge in some part of our lives this Christmas whether it's complaining about the complications of getting ready for Christmas, figuring out what to get people for presents, and calculating how we're going to pay for those presents. Everything that 2020 has brought to us sure doesn't help lower our hassle factor numbers either!

But Christmas is *always* inconvenient. Take Mary, for example. We read in verse 7, "She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Martin Luther once referred to that town where Jesus was born as "wretched Bethlehem". I don't think *that* description has ever made it into a Christmas hymn. Can you imagine singing "O *Wretched* Town of Bethlehem?" Not very inspiring, but in a way that description is accurate. To be sure there was no place *nice* enough for the Son of God to be born, but especially not a small, overcrowded little backwater village like Bethlehem. In fact, that tiny town was so overcrowded that Jesus had to born in a cattle stall, because there was no room for them at the inn. But what about Mary's "hassle factor" here? I'm sure her hassle number would be off the charts! She was inconvenienced *a lot* more than Joseph. Those of us who have been in a delivery room to witness a birth or especially those of you who have gone through the arduous process of *giving* birth know the pain, the emotion, the mess that delivering a baby can involve. And Mary had to deliver her first son, Luke says, in a place where animals stayed, placing her newborn in a feed box for cattle. She probably also rested on hay after the delivery.

Christmas is most inconvenient of all, though, for Jesus. The apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian believers: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus left the splendor of heaven and come to our planet with its scratchy hay, biting winds, and smelly barns. But even more, He came to live as one of us. We are people who are hurt and who hurt one another in our relationships. Often, it's not done on purpose but sometimes it is. We're people who sometimes demand that God, our Creator, answer to *us*, rather than our yielding to His good and gracious will. We are people who at times want God to be in our lives on our own terms, rather than be part of all we think and say and do. Jesus was inconvenienced

for us for all the times we go against God. He came because we are sinful, every one of us.

Yet, God felt that sharing His love was worth all the inconvenience of Christmas. When we love others, we'll put up with inconvenience to be with them or help them or show them we care. The apostle John writes in his First Letter about how much God loves us and why Jesus put up with the inconvenience of becoming human: "This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world, that we might live through Him. This is love: Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn 4: 9-10).

I think you and I would agree that whatever inconvenience we have gone through this Christmas is small, extremely small compared to what Joseph, Mary, and especially Jesus had in their lives at the first Christmas. But Bethlehem is just the beginning of the inconvenience for Jesus. In Matthew 8: 20 He described Himself as someone Who has "nowhere to lay His head". He had no bed to call his own. And then when He died, He was buried in a borrowed tomb. That death on the cross was the most inconvenient thing of all. But John reminds us that Jesus was the sacrifice for sin, it was His death that gives us life. His death is the way in which our sins are forgiven. Reaching that goal, coupled with His rising from the dead to show that God accepted all His Son had done.

All of this began in the humble, inconvenient surroundings of Bethlehem. Yet, God's love came down at Christmas for us in this tiny baby boy, Mary's Son and God's Son, Jesus, born for you and me to defeat sin, death, and the devil forever!

A Christmas song written by Chris Rice called "Welcome to Our World" pictures it so well:

Tears are falling, hearts are breaking
How we need to hear from God
You've been promised, we've been waiting
Welcome Holy Child
Welcome Holy Child
Hope that you don't mind our manger
How I wish we would have known
But long-awaited Holy stranger
Make yourself at home
Please make yourself at home
Bring your peace into our violence

Bid our hungry souls be filled
Word now breaking Heaven's silence
Welcome to our world
Welcome to our world
Fragile finger sent to heal us
Tender brow prepared for thorn
Tiny heart whose blood will save us
Unto us is born
Unto us is born
So, wrap our injured flesh around You
Breathe our air and walk our sod
Rob our sin and make us holy
Perfect Son of God
Perfect Son of God
Welcome to our world

Jesus did all of this so: "That whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3: 16). That's what Christmas is all about.

Everything else will fade away. The "inconveniences" of the season will be over and forgotten. The decorations will soon be packed away for another year. All too soon the excitement of children and the happy glow of all we've come to expect from this holy night will have come and gone. But not this, the mystery of God made flesh for us and for our salvation.

So, shut down you head and open up your heart to receive the great glad news that Christ is born a child. Let every heart prepare Him room this night. God comes among us wrapped in the swaddling clothes of the Word of His gospel. He comes for every soul that's inconvenienced, distressed, lonely, or grieving. He comes for every wounded mind and heart. He comes for a peace that passes all understanding, for forgiveness, and for life and our salvation. He comes for you -and you -and you this night. And you can be sure of this: "Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in." Amen.

Let us pray:

O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
Oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel! Amen.