

Simple Joy

Week 3 The Humble Road

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The places that we've been. Where we've lived, where we visited. Even the places we've just passed through. Shape who we are. The impact, they impact these places. Impact how we see the world. How we make decisions, how we even, maybe even dream about the future. I remember passing through a town of blue earth, Minnesota, with a population of just over 3000.

And there in the town stands a giant 55ft. Anybody know Christmas tree now? Jolly Green giant. Yeah. Oh. This Jolly Green giant stands three feet taller than the hug me Jesus that you can find in Monroe, Ohio. Now, I've never seen the hug me Jesus, so I can't say that that has changed my life. But seeing the jolly Green Giant in this small town on a road trip that Tom and I took when we were first married, has been imprinted on my brain.

It was an unexpected thing. We didn't know this town had this giant jolly green giant, but, a giant green man wearing just a few, leaves for clothing is something that I soon won't forget. It brought me joy. Now, not the same kind of joy that our message will bring today. So this advent, we are on a road trip to Bethlehem.

We started because of Rome, the most powerful, powerful force in the ancient world issued a census. That's what brought us on this journey. And we can learn a lot of things from Rome. But one of the things that we learned from Rome is that power, is pretty incredible. Rome had a lot of power. We also sometimes have power.

Sometimes we long to have power. We also need to make sure that we are careful about not abusing our power. Now, although Rome's power started this journey that Joseph and Mary were going to take, it's not the same kind of power that we'll talk about next week in Bethlehem. Now, last week, the youth brought the message of peace, and I'm going to just pause here to talk about last weekend.

Last weekend was should have been the weekend of joy, I thought, because it was such a joyful weekend. You'll remember if you were. If you were here. I'll tell you. Like. Well, the little kids were on the stage and they were singing Christmas songs and doing little actions, and they brought the Christmas story to life. The older youth, they brought the message and they did an incredible job.

They led the whole service. Even the game was fun. They were, they were greeters out front. There were some, even some people working behind the scenes that that you may not know of. There were a couple, a couple youth who worked the first time here, booth out in the atrium, and they gave tours to people who were first time, which is awesome.

Just it was a joy filled worship last weekend. I'm so proud of the kids and the youth for sharing their stories and being brave enough to be up here on stage. And I'm so thankful for the staff and the volunteer leaders who are here every single week on Sunday mornings and Sunday nights and Wednesday nights to work and guide our youth.

It is Praise God for that. But last weekend the youth used the scripture about Elizabeth and Zechariah. Now Elizabeth is Mary's cousin and Jesus's mother, and Elizabeth and Zechariah found out in their old age that they were going to be parents after a long, long wait. I know that some of you know that struggle of longing for a child.

Now, Elizabeth and Zechariah would give birth to a son named John, and John would be later known as John the Baptist. And his job in life, his purpose in life was to prepare the way for Jesus. And all of this happened in the town of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is called the City of Peace. And although Jerusalem, the city today is, is a relatively safe place, it's certainly not a peaceful place.

And then just driving a few miles and in any direction you will find poverty, starving people, starving children. And then a few miles beyond that you will find war. The Gaza Strip is 75. 75% of the people who live in the Gaza Strip are under the age of 25. It's hard to reconcile the idea of o the peace that Elizabeth and Zechariah found, or the peace that we have in our own lives, or that we long to have in our own lives when war is raging.

In the last 14 months or so, over 10,000 children have died in this war. Sometimes the power and the control like that found in Rome feel like they are overpowering the message of the peace that Jesus brings. But that's why the Christmas message is so important. We cannot stop sharing the story of Jesus with others. Instead, we pray with big and bold prayers.

We pray for peace that will cover the whole earth soon. So we look at the story and this humble road that we are on from Rome to Jerusalem. And. And now we look to the town of Nazareth, where an angel visited Mary. So this is Luke, chapter one, starting at verse 26. When Elizabeth was six months pregnant.

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, rejoice, favored one. The Lord is with you. She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

The angel said, don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look, you will conceive and give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David, his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever.

And there will be no end to his kingdom. Then Mary said to the angel, how will this happen? Since I haven't had sexual relations with a man. The angel replied, The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son.

Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman, who was labeled unable to conceive, is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God. Then Mary said, I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me, just as you have said. Then the angel left her.

What Luke wrote was a political claim. Luke wrote that Jesus would establish a new kingdom and rule the world, a kingdom that will never end. This for sure got Rome's attention. Well, what Luke wrote was also a new theological claim. Luke said that this child to be born of Mary was going to be God's son. And that's not a way that anybody had ever related to God before.

So this got the attention of the Jews, and soon the rest of the world. And this son, God's son, was going to be born in Nazareth. Now, if you visit Nazareth today, it's a booming city known as the Silicon Valley of the Arab community. But back in Mary's time, the city wasn't even on the map. It wasn't even listed in the city's.

Historians think that this town, this village might have been maybe 100 people or so. And here this angel shows up to this little tiny village and gives this message and tells young Mary to rejoice. Voice. Now I'm sure. Mary. So how many things went through Mary's head when this angel came to her? I'm sure so many things. But maybe she's questioning like joy.

You really want me to have joy from this news? This is big news. Maybe she even said something like, I'm just a small town girl living in a lonely world. And then. And then just a little while later, then, people would begin to question Jesus. You know what good can come from Nazareth? And then God might answer with, well, here comes the sun.

Didn't do. Bringing hope and resurrection and redemption to the world. Now here's a picture I want to show you. This picture is a picture of a little river. Maybe you would classify it as a stream. It's narrow enough that you could probably jump over it if you took a running start, and shallow enough that you could certainly wade to the other side.

And it seems pretty insignificant until you realize that this. This is a picture of the mighty Mississippi. This is the very beginning of the mighty Mississippi, the second longest river in North America. And what appears. Insignificant initially becomes the country's most important waterway. Its name itself, the Mississippi River, comes from Native American language that translates something to the great River.

It's known for. And it's been it's important because of transportation and trade and farming and irrigation and recreation and tourism and biodiversity of freshwater supply, natural flood control, hydroelectric power, fertile soil, cultural significance, significance, habitat for wildlife like all from this little stream. And even greater things came from Nazareth. And so if God can use Nazareth, God can use you and me, regardless of what our past is or where we came from.

Our origins don't define our potential or limit what we can become. We saw with the Mississippi River beginning places are not always good predictors of possibility. Often we measure the potential by what we can see at the start. Oh well, this person has a lot of resources or. Well, they're they have a lot of skill in this area or they're these circumstances will allow for greater things to happen.

But the truth is, is that the journey to great outcomes frequently begin in places of simplicity. Simplicity strips away our distractions, allowing the essentials to become into focus, to come into focus. It reminds us of the. The most transformative possibilities often emerge from humble, quiet, simple beginnings rather than elaborate or impressive starts. Nazareth teaches us simplicity, which can lead to joy.

Now, I spent a little time in Nazareth when I traveled to Israel, and we were only in Nazareth for maybe 20 or 30 minutes, tops. But it was one of my favorite stops. And here's why. The stop was simple. Now, other places we visit in when we were in Israel, like the place that marked where Jesus was born.

It was not a simple, stable or a simple cave, but rather it was a church, a grand church. And you walked in and it was there was ornate details and decorations in this church. The spot where Jesus was said to be, where he said to be, crucified and buried. This spot was the same. It was there was people.

It was a big building. There were crowds. There were ornate decorations, elaborate decorations. But in Nazareth, the place that we visited, it was a totally different feeling. Now, here's a picture of me in Nazareth, standing at the top of a hill overlooking the city below. So that is Nazareth below. And when we were up there, our guide pointed out something.

He said, you know the places that we've visited, okay, while Jesus went here, or Jesus was born here, or Jesus, his tomb was here, like historians like they disagree about the exact location of these things. But here we were, on the tallest hill next to the town where Jesus grew up in, and our guide said, you can bet, almost guarantee, that teenage Jesus climbed this very overlook.

And here I got to stand there. It was simple, but I felt more connected to God in that moment than some of the other spots that we visited. Jesus and his family grew up in Nazareth, and Carpenter. They spent time in the carpentry shop and attending synagogue and interacting with neighbor neighbors. A life focused on practical needs and community connection.

That's what would have happened in small town Nazareth. Mary and Joseph raised their family in a simple way. So imagine if we simplified our lives. Think about the upcoming celebrations were about likely to have. What if we had simple meals? What if we just went with simple gifts? What if we just had simple decorations up? What might happen from that?

What might we do with the extra time? Now, simplicity is not just about material possessions, but also what happens internally.

Jesus has a lot, and the Bible has a lot to say about our possessions and the worldly things that we acquire. But simplifying our internal lives, our pride, our anxieties, our unnecessary burdens that we carry. What if we dropped those? I know it's hard, and I know sometimes we have to work through how we can drop those things.

But what if we dropped those things so that we could clearly focus on God? So what happens when we simplify? We find joy in unexpected ways. Why? Because God has big things in store for us. And maybe you're just thinking, well, I'm just a small town girl or boy, right? Maybe you think, well, life is moving way too quickly for me to think about making a difference.

But. But God has a way of using what seems small and insignificant to do extraordinary things. Nazareth was a small, overlooked town, but it was chosen for one of the greatest announcements in history. God's message came to this simple place, reminding us that that greatness often starts with what seems insignificant. And by living simply, we can give more to others.

We can help more with others. But if we're honest, we know things get in the way. Mother Teresa said this. She said, be faithful in small things, because it is in them that your strength lies. Now Mother Teresa knew the power of simplicity. She stripped away the unnecessary. She stripped away the extravagant so that she could focus on loving and serving the poor.

She wore simple clothing to be, to free herself from materialism. And her life teaches us some really incredible things. Her life teaches us something powerful that the joy doesn't come from having more, but from serving others with love. She believed that the missionaries of Charity should bring joy to others, that that they served. And you know what this joy became contagious.

But just like any relationship, joy takes work. Even Mother Teresa faced seasons in her life where she longed to feel God's presence. Yet she remained faithful. So. So don't sell yourself short. Don't say, well, I don't have the right skills or the gifts, because Nazareth teaches us that even in the simplest places, even the simplest people can make room for God to do really big things.

Simplifying your life can make room for joy. Now there's nothing more that I want for. For my kids and for the people that are around me. There's nothing more that I want than them to find joy, and not the fleeting kind of joy that disappears as soon as something difficult or hard in life happens. But that joy that's deep, abiding joy that comes from knowing Jesus, the Savior who came from a simple town for the salvation of the world.

So as you prepare for celebrations this coming week, think about one thing that you might simplify so that you can focus on God more. Because the big, life changing story that began in Nazareth's small, simple town teaches us this that when we simplify our lives, we make room for joy. We make room for others, and we make room for the Savior who came to bring us joy.

Would you pray with me?

Holy God, thank you for the example of Nazareth, a simple, quiet place where Jesus grew up, where he explored, and where he grew in. In your love, God, and he grew in his purpose. Help us to slow down. Help us to find you in the ordinary moments of our lives and teach us to live with humility, trusting that that you are at work even in the smallest things.

And as we go from here, remind us that we don't need the big and flashy things to experience your presence. You need us exactly where we are. You know where we came from, but yet you are ready to use us. So let us follow Jesus's example and live with open hearts to to all and to to sharing the good news of Jesus with everyone. And in Jesus's name we pray. Amen.