

Using Our GPS Sermon Series  
#3 – Arriving at Your Destination  
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I got a text the other day from a friend who told me he was about to get on a plane to travel for the holidays. I texted him back the words “God speed,” which is a traditional blessing for someone about to embark on a journey. However, my phone didn’t like that phrase. For those of you not familiar with auto-correct, this is a function on so-called “smart” phones that takes the words you type that your phone thinks are wrong and changes them into what your phone thinks is right. So while I meant to tell my friend “God speed,” what ended up getting sent was “God speeding,” to which my friend replied, “Wow! I’d had to be the police officer writing THAT ticket!”

But maybe my phone was smarter than I give it credit for, because in a way we are celebrating that God is speeding – speeding toward earth in the form of a little baby to show us in a new way God’s love and grace in our lives and in our world. And there’s not a minute to spare, is there? We need to hear God’s message again, wrapped in swaddling cloths, and it can’t arrive a moment too soon. We’ve been on quite a journey to get to the manger, and we’re almost at our destination.

Or are we? Today we finish on sermon series on Using Your GPS (God’s Positioning System). We started Advent by acquiring our satellites, or locking into the guiding signal that God is sending us, over and above all the other signals that swirl around us. Then, we got lost together and figured out how God helps us recalculate our route when we go astray from God’s path. Today, we can breathe a sigh of relief as we hear the soothing tones of our GPS tell us, “Arriving at destination.”

No matter how relieved we are to be arriving at Christmas, we can’t come close to matching how Joseph and Mary must have felt as the lights of Bethlehem flickered into view over the horizon. This couple has been on a long and arduous journey, and I don’t mean only their pilgrimage from Nazareth. When we began our story in Advent, both thought they were on fairly straightforward paths – Joseph was going to be a humble carpenter and family man, and Mary was going to be his bride and the mother of their children. But God set them on a new course, one which involved Mary becoming pregnant and having a baby while Joseph stood by her side and supported her. A stable in Bethlehem was not the destination they had planned. They are like Clark Griswold in the movie “Vacation,” who is dead-set on taking his family to the Wally World amusement park, only to find out when they arrive that it’s closed for repairs. “Sorry folks, park’s closed. The moose out front should have told ya.” For Mary and Joseph, the life they were expecting to lead was closed for repairs.

Well, if that wasn’t enough, Luke tells us that Mary didn’t even have the luxury of spending her last few waddling weeks nesting in her own home. The Romans ordered a census, which meant that Joseph had to travel from his current home in Nazareth to his original home in Bethlehem. And he wasn’t about to leave Mary by herself. So the two of them make the 80-mile trip, which would have included about 42,000 bathroom breaks.

I wonder how they first reacted when they heard about the census. They knew Joseph had to go, but Mary didn’t. Was Joseph going to defy Rome and not go? Was Joseph going to leave Mary and miss their baby’s birth? Was Mary going to somehow make this long trip on the back

of a donkey? I have to imagine the couple wondered just how they were going to get to Bethlehem.

Do you ever wonder about that at this time of year? I know I do. As each year comes to a close, I feel my soul being beckoned once again to kneel at the manger and behold the Christ child. But doesn't Bethlehem seem so far away? There are so many other things we either want to do – like Christmas parties and shopping for gifts – or have to do – like Christmas parties and shopping for gifts. If we started a tally at the beginning of December, how many destinations do you think we will have journeyed toward? The mall, the post office, a restaurant, a school, a family gathering, our church. We go a lot of places each Advent. But do we, at any point, journey toward Bethlehem? Do we make intentional time to focus on Christ? Or do we throw the baby out with the egg nog? What is our destination this Advent?

Thankfully, Mary and Joseph finally arrive at Bethlehem and look for a place to rest. And it is there, in Bethlehem, in an animal stable, that baby Jesus is born. Mary wraps him in swaddling cloths and lays him in a manger. The end. But wait! The story isn't over, is it? Next we have the shepherds, who hear the birth announcement from the angels and go to see the Christ child. The end. But wait! Then the wise men follow the star to see the miracle that has taken place in Bethlehem. The end. But wait! Just as Joseph and Mary are about to pack up and head back to Nazareth, an angel of the Lord recalculates their route and tells them to go to Egypt to avoid King Herod's wrath. And they lived happy ever after in Egypt. No they didn't! After Herod died, Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus finally return to their home in Nazareth to settle down into a calm, peaceful, uneventful life together. Or maybe not. For them, the journey was far from over.

You see, one of the things we can learn from these well-known stories is that Jesus' birth causes people to travel. Mary and Joseph rack up some major frequent-rider miles, the shepherds ditch their flocks to go to Bethlehem, the wise men come from East to see the baby. Jesus' birth dislodges people from the comfortable, the familiar, the well-worn routes, and sends them in new directions with a new destination.

Will Jesus' birth this year cause us to travel? I'm not talking about over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house. I'm talking about the kind of movement, the kind of journeying that keeps our spirit awake and alive. It's easy to settle into spiritual ruts, cruise-controlling through Christmas like this story is some kind of fairy tale. But the birth of Jesus can dislodge us from our places of comfort, sending us off on a faith-filled journey as we pursue a calling to serve in new ways, to show God's love to new people, or to deepen our understanding of scripture or our relationship with God. Christ's birth this year is another chance for us to set our course for a new destination.

But wait, you say! I thought Christmas was the destination! Isn't this what the build-up is all about? Is that what we are anticipating during Advent? We've been setting our sights on Dec. 25, so once we get there, the journey is over, right? Just like once the baby is born, all the hard work is done. It's smooth sailing from that point, right?

You see, the manger is not our destination. Jesus' purpose on earth wasn't just to be born. Mary and Joseph haven't seen anything yet! This baby is only the beginning of what God has planned for us. God is going to be revealed in incredible, life-changing ways through this child who is born on Christmas, this Christmas. But here's the thing – will we be there to see it? Or will we still be at the manger because we think that's where the story ends? Or will we even get to the manger, or will we be tripped up by the season before we can kneel down and worship?

The manger is only the beginning. There is oh so much more to see! Our destination is not Bethlehem, but Golgotha. Jesus' destination is not the manger, but the cross...and beyond. And we are called to take that journey with him, to hear the stories again about how he heals and teaches and forgives. We are called to travel, to make our way from Nazareth to Galilee, to Caesarea Philippi and Bethany, from the Upper Room to the Mount of Olives. This Christmas is a new beginning for us, a new call to follow.

And as we make that journey, we will be reminded of a truth that we know, but sometimes forget to live out. The joy of this life, the blessings we are to experience, the lessons we will learn, the strength we will gain from perseverance, the challenges that will fortify us, are not to be found at our destination. They are to be found on the journey itself. If we put our blinders on and only focus on arriving at the destination, we will miss the glorious blessings that are to be found along the way. And in reality, do we ever really arrive at our destination? On my GPS, when I'm getting close to where I'm going, a bright green flag appears on the screen. Wouldn't it be great if life worked that way, if a big green flag appeared when we finally arrived, at the right job or right decision or number in our savings account? But what we often find is what Mary and Joseph found. What looks like a destination – Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth – is really just a rest stop. We expect God will be a map for us, showing us exactly where to go and what to do, plotting out every point of our lives. But in reality, maybe God is a compass, pointing us in the right direction, but letting us learn along the journey.

For us, may this Christmas be a rest stop at the manger that then propels us forward, seeking the new paths that God has for us. I know 2012 is going to be an incredible year for Crestwood. God has already started to work in and around this congregation. And the same thing can happen for each of us as we pay attention to God's guiding signal and allow God to work through our lives to put us on the right path. Go to the manger! Make that trip! Spend time marveling at the birth of the Christ child! There's something wonderful to see there. You don't want to miss it. But don't stop there. Don't stop there. Keep going.