

Longing for Hope

Week 1 The Humble Road

By Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

It's the season. We talk about the origin of Jesus's life on earth. So the second chapter of Luke's account of the life of Jesus begins like this. Luke chapter two, verses one through four. In those days, Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax list. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria.

Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city called Bethlehem in Judea. Now I like to think of Tom, my husband, and I's origin stories. Kind of like modern day Mary and Joseph situations. Our mom's traveling heavy with child like Mary.

Minus the donkey and the angels and the whole giving birth to the Messiah part. But when I was born, my parents lived briefly in a small town. My dad's dream of owning a bowling alley brought him to that town. And we. We lived in that small town like a small town, like with no hospital. And so my birth was kind of like one of those quick trips you take to, grab some groceries in the next in the store, in the next bigger but still small town.

And Tom, when Tom was born, Tom's parents got stuck away from their house because of a snowstorm. It was kind of like the census of Mary and Joseph's time. Only instead of the Roman Empire dictating the travel plans, it was Mother Nature saying to Tom's mom, whoa, wait a minute. You're not going anywhere, lady. So there was Tom's mom.

A couple hours away from her home, trudging through snow drifts. Or, at least that's how I like to picture it. And, to get to the hospital and my mom traveling to the nearby town, probably casually just rolling in, saying, you know, I'll be home by dinner. I was her fourth born, so I'm sure it was easy right?

Just kidding. Well, it turns out that our two moms both traveled to give birth. Ended up in the same small town. So even though neither of us grew up there, we didn't live there. Our moms ended up in that same town going to the same hospital, having the same doctor deliver their babies. Now, fast forward 17 years later.

For me at least, Tom's a couple few years older than I am. Tom moved to Nebraska and we met in Nebraska. And one day we were swapping the where were you born stories. And we realized this funny truth. That's, when something like this Tom was like, where were you born? And I was like, small town in Iowa.

He's like, me, too. Which town? And I said, Harlan. And he's like, oh, so was I. And I was like, no, you weren't. And he's like, no, really? I was. And we started talking about the story. And the more we talked, the funnier it got. And we had started life in the same town, taken completely different journeys, grew up in two different states and somehow meeting here in Nebraska.

Now, when I think about pregnant Mary and Joseph making their trek to Bethlehem, travelers guided by this, kind of circumstance, they probably didn't fully understand. And they were sent there because of a census piece, and then others would be eventually guided by a star. And so advent begins with Jesus's parents, Mary and Joseph, on a journey.

We invite you to follow along on this journey of Mary and Joseph with participating in the advent study. You can do that in your life group. Or there's a small group that's starting tomorrow night. You can join or you can study on your own through amplified media, so you can find that out on the horizons, web page, the event page.

So the leader of this study that we are studying is, pastor Rob super Way. And in the book there's a book and a video that goes along with it. But in the book, he tells this story about when he went to the Holy Land as a seminary student. And he said, on that trip there was the guide was this well known historian and this this guy gave the seminary student some sage advice.

He said, what you get out of this trip is up to you now. The guide had a habit of just stopping getting off the bus, and he would just start walking and talking and weaving history and stories all together. Rob has to, Rob was saying that if you weren't quick to follow, like you're going to miss something really cool or really important.

He said some seminary students decided to stay back and take their time to get off the bus and wander around on their own. But for pastor Rob, he recalls being the first 1 or 1 of the first ones off the bus every time, eager to get to keep up. And that simple habit of being ready and paying attention and leaning into the experience made all the difference for him on that trip.

It's kind of like the advent season. What you get out of it is up to you. Advent invites us to pay attention and to get off the busyness bus of life and keep up and prepare our hearts for the arrival of Jesus. So advent is this time of waiting where we're waiting. But it's not this passive waiting.

We're like expectant waiting. It's a time where we draw near to God. We listen carefully. We lean in to the joy and love and peace and hope that we can find this season. So advent asks us to prepare our hearts for the Savior. So as we journey through this season, the question is, is will you jump off the bus and be ready to follow?

Or will you let this moment pass us by? What you get out of advent is completely up to you. So here we are following Mary and Joseph story. And in order to understand Mary and Joseph journey and Jesus's humble beginning, we first have to understand the history of the Roman Empire, which is far from humble.

Here is a map of Rome. This this map is, is what it looked like. The, the red circle is what it looked like, around Jesus's birth. Is there another picture? Yeah. So that is how it started about 300 years before Jesus was born. And in that time, if you back up so that 300 years it went from this to that, right?

That is a huge section. And what happened is Caesar Augustus ruled from 27 BCE to 14 A.D., C.E. and he was he was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. And he conquered, he defeated a lot of his enemies and rivals. And he became the sole ruler of Rome. Now, Augustus turned the Roman

Republic, that little tiny spot into this empire where he was the head claiming he was the Son of God because he thought Julius Caesar was divine.

Now I think we maybe have another picture. This is a size comparison of what the Mediterranean Sea would look like if it was in the United States. So we're talking about a big a big portion. That was the Roman Empire. Now, Augustus, ruled and he boasted that he's like, I am ruling with peace and justice. But his rule over this Roman Empire often met meant oppression and control over many people, including the Israelites.

Now, this census that Mary that sent Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem likely had very little to do with caring about people. It had to do with taxes and power and money and control. Now, historians and theologians mostly agree that there are some errors in Luke's account of of some of the history. So most of them will agree that this census, that census that Luke was talking about here in the second chapter is that that didn't actually happen in in that time frame.

Luke was either unaware of the history of what happened when Jesus was born, or Luke was indifferent to the actual course of events in history. And maybe Luke had a bigger point, a larger point, a greater point of what he was actually trying to tell us.

Luke's claim of this census says that there was power in Rome and to better understand this power, we here is another map. And this is a map where it shows, where Rome is. That's where Augustus lived. And he had a declared this census and Mary and Joseph living in Nazareth a long ways away. Right. Decision in Rome affected Mary and Joseph all the way in Nazareth.

And then Bethlehem is not too far from Nazareth. Sometimes in life we are the ones with power. Sometimes we have power at work or in our houses, in our homes, or at other places or organizations that we are part of. And sometimes our decisions have come to have consequences, good and bad consequences for those around us, or even miles and miles away.

We talked about our choice of being generous with project Hope. The pride, the mission that we support in India. Right. Our decisions here impact them around the world. Now, some of us are in seasons where it feels like we're living under Roman control, like life decisions. People are making decisions and it feels like their decisions are holding us captive.

Things out of our control. But how we how we respond to these things is in our control. So here the Israelites, they want something better. Augustus claimed to rule with peace and with justice. But the Israelites, they didn't have freedom. So the other, the Israelites, yearned for true freedom and justice, something no Roman decree would ever give them.

And so the story of Luke paints with this picture, and the account of Jesus's life paints this picture on the oppressor. And then it shines this light on Jesus's life and Jesus's actions and tells us Jesus's life and actions, tells us how we should respond to the oppressor. And the good news that Jesus brings. So advent begins with longing and waiting, not surface level wishes.

I wish that, you know, I could lose 10 pounds, or I wish I could be more wise with our money. But like real longing from grief or fears or loneliness and Jesus and Advent in the story of Jesus can remind us that we are not alone sometimes in our fears and our longings, in our grief. So, jumping years

later, as the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Romans, Paul writes that people are groaning in anticipation.

So here's Romans chapter eight, verses 18 through 25. Paul says, I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits, breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice. It was the choice of the one who subjected it, but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay, and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children.

We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation we ourselves, who have the spirit as the first crop of the harvest, also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that is in hope.

Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience we two groan. Yet in this groaning we find hope that comes with the advent season, a hope that doesn't come from what we can't see, a hope that doesn't come from the things that are out of our control, but a hope that comes from trusting in God's promises.

The journey to the manger is through our deepest yearnings, aligning our hearts with God. Now, for some of us, this is the most wonderful time of the year. There's family gatherings and Christmas lights and trees and gift giving and all of the things that are exciting about this season, but season. But that's not true for everyone in this time of year.

But advent starts with longing and waiting. And as pastor Rob says in the book, it's not just those little longings, but deep longings that reflect our fear and our loneliness. So that is the journey to the manger. But it holds even more meaning when we think about what God longs for. And the question we ask is what breaks God's heart?

Pastor Rob says this. He says this question can radically change the direction of our lives. Because when our hearts break over, the things that break God's heart, God may call us to be solutions to the problems. Sometimes the direction of our lives changes because of a simple decision. Decisions that that's made by others. Sometimes. Sometimes it's our own decisions.

But I want you to think about someone who you know is struggling this year, struggling to find the joy of the season. Maybe it's a family member, maybe it's a friend or a neighbor or a coworker, and maybe they're going through a loss, or they're grieving, or they they're going through a divorce or just a financially, whatever. It is a difficult time.

Maybe that someone is you and maybe, you need an invitation. And we are having a blue Christmas service here again this year. And the blue Christmas service will be on December 19th. And it's a service for anyone who needs a space, a space to feel whatever it is that you are feeling and a space to say, you know what?

It's okay if you are not feeling the joy of the season. And so if that is you, if you are needing that invitation, I'm making that invitation to you to join us. But maybe it's someone else that you know

who is needing that invitation. And of course, a personal invitation is the best way to do it. On the back of your seats, there is a blue Christmas postcard.

I invite you to take that postcard and give it to somebody that, you know, take a picture of it, send a text. A personal invitation is best. And even better, though, is saying, hey, I will come with you to this service because you might actually radically change the direction of someone's life by that simple invitation, because God does call us, for he wants our hearts to break, to break in the same way that God's heart breaks.

Sometimes God calls us to be a part of that solution. So here in the beginning of this Christmas story, Rome is used as an example of the power that's in our lives, the things that are out of our control. And Rome's power was the exact opposite of what is about to happen in that little town. And there are still powers today that control us.

And these powers are again, the exact opposite of the power that Jesus brings, and that God's kingdom is all about a data. Our advent, candle reader, she said these words today. She said, we light this candle of hope as a sign of our commitment to pay attention and prepare for the days that are surely coming and are already here.

The days when God's kingdom of love and justice and mercy will reign. See, advent isn't just about what we long for, it's about what God longs for. So this story reminds us that all creation groans with us, waiting for freedom and restoration from a broken world. And the groaning isn't just a cry of despair, but it's the labor pains of something new and beautiful being born.

So decisions in Rome changed the lives of Mary and Joseph, and decisions that we make today, whether to love or invite or give or trust, can change our lives as well. And sometimes the lives around us too. So, as we prepare for. The holy, the holy meal, the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we think about waiting. We wait with patience and hope and courage to follow this journey to the manger.

However, it leads us to where we're going to the manger. And that's what this time of advent is all about. As we come to this table and we think about the life of Jesus, and not only from the time when Mary and Joseph were traveling the manger and Jesus's birth and, and death and resurrection.

Right. When we think about this meal. That Jesus shared with his disciples, shared with his closest friends, and he knew what was about to happen, and the disciples were waiting for something to happen, maybe even waiting for Jesus to conquer the Roman Empire. But it didn't work out exactly as the disciples thought. But it did work out. It worked out and now we have that hope. We have that hope for what's to come, where God's kingdom is here. And there's justice and peace and love all throughout the world.

We come to God now as we prepare for communion. And God, holy are you, and blessed is your son, Jesus Christ, whom you sent in the fullness of time to be a light to the nations. God, you scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, and you have mercy on those who fear you from generation to generation.

God, you put down the mighty from their thrones and exalt those of low degree. You fill the hungry with good things, and the rich you send away empty. Your own son came among us as a servant to

be Emmanuel, your presence with us. And he humbled himself in obedience to your will, and freely accepted death on a cross. By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection, you gave birth to your church. You delivered us from slavery to sin and death and made us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.

God Holy, pour out your Holy Spirit on us, gathered here in this space, and on these gifts of bread and cup, and make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world, the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. Would you join me in saying the Lord's Prayer together?

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.