

When I think about Joseph and a very pregnant Mary setting out to the city of David in Bethlehem, I have a hard time making it seem real. Usually what comes to mind when I think of Mary and Joseph on their travels, are two figures with kitchen towels on their heads, making their way slowly down a church aisle, with soft Christmas music playing in the background - not the 62 mile journey which would have probably taken about 10 days on a donkey.

A friend of mine told me a story about her family's travels this Christmas which brought the reality of the rigors of travel much closer. Her son and daughter-in-law have planned to drive from South Carolina to DC this Christmas Eve with their two year old, and dog in tow. Her son flew down from DC Friday night after work and the couple planned to get on the road today. Her daughter in law is pregnant and doesn't know if she can make the drive in one day so they are thinking about spending Christmas Eve in a motel along the way. Even if we haven't tried something like what they are attempting, it doesn't take much to imagine what it is going to be like for them - a long drive with traffic, rest stops, fast food, public bathrooms, a two year old who is probably cranky, a dog who has to be walked and then Christmas Eve in a motel somewhere along I 95. It sounds like a difficult and lonely trip away from family and the warm holiday comforts of home.

Now this story doesn't get us to extent of Mary and Joseph's predicament – a 9 hour car trip from South Carolina doesn't quite compare with 10 days on a donkey and having a baby in a stable. But it does remind us of what difficult travel can be like. Most of us have been on long car trips - perhaps very recently. We have been stuck in hours of traffic. We have been in the car and seen the signs that say that where we are going is still 120 miles away. We know what it is like when we are ready to get out of the car, and yet there are several more hours before we get there. We have driven with cars so packed up that it is an endeavor to find anything we need. We have slept on a friend's pull out couch along the way. We know about some of the hardships of being on the road away from home.

This is the sort of situation this family on their way to Bethlehem was in. It was anything but easy to be pregnant and make a long trip on a donkey. Mary must have been longing to get to their destination and rest, but when they finally arrive in Bethlehem, there is nowhere to stay. They end up in the stable out back among the animals. This is where Jesus is born. This is how God came on earth so that we could know how much we are loved by God.

Maybe the way that this birth happens is part of God's message to us. Jesus is not born at home – in a dwelling surrounded by family and friends. Mary didn't have time to prepare and rest for the birth. The circumstances of Jesus' birth reminds us that God comes into our lives, not just in the good times while we are surrounded by family and friends, but in the difficult times - especially in the difficult times - when we are alone and far away from all that is familiar. The Christ child being born in a stable because there was nowhere else to go, reminds us that God is in the world when things have not worked out, when we don't have what we need, and when we have all lost all the supports that we depend on to get us through life.

In a way, we are all traveling. We are on the journey called life. We have long trips when our destination seems to be always hundreds of miles away. There are times when we never feel settled or at home in our surroundings and that the only places where we can sit for a moment

are like rest stops on I-95. We go through tough times where the lines of traffic are endlessly long where there is no hope in sight. We experience the times where the support of our family and friends seems very far away. It is in these times of being away from all that seems good and familiar that God breaks into with the birth of baby boy. Jesus is born. God incarnate is present on earth.

God comes into our world just as God did 2000 years ago when God became human. Divinity came down to earth in a moment like no other – into a moment where a family was far way from home and could find no place to stay. This moment is for us. God doesn't wait for us to have made it to our destination. God doesn't wait for us to be well rested and prepared. God just comes in to the chaos of our lives.

Tonight we celebrate God's gift to us – a gift that came at the end of a long and difficult journey, a baby to tell us that we are loved by God no matter how far away from home we are. This gift reminds us that we are the beloved of God. The coming of the Christ child brings us into God presence, into God peace, into God's joy and into God's love. Merry Christmas. Jesus Christ is born. For all of us travelers, God is saying, I am with you, I love you and you are home.