

Riding With Mary To Bethlehem

Isaiah 9:2-9, Luke 2:1-20

One of the many adventures I have yet to experience is a ride down the side of the Grand Canyon to the bottom on a mule. One website calls the ride a “unique experience” and the “ride of your life!” (Well -- I guess!)

Before you begin such a trip down the Grand Canyon on mule back, you have to sign documents indicating you understand that the National Parks Service does not guarantee the safety of any participant and is not responsible for any injury, major or minor, brain damage or death that might result from the journey. You have to state that you have no known serious health problems or heart conditions and that **you are not pregnant**.

These admonitions are repeated during an orientation session geared to weed out the weak-kneed. As recorded by one participant: "If you are afraid of heights, have recently had open-heart surgery or are prone to whining -- get out now and get your money back. If you are not willing to hit the thick-skinned mule with your crop (called a "motivator") in order to keep him within a yard of the next mule -- get out now and get your money back.

"If you are not willing to drink your water on command and get hosed down halfway through to prevent heat exhaustion and dehydration -- get out now and get your money back. If the hairpin turns, where you will find yourself hanging over a 6,000-foot drop, will make you dizzy or upset -- get out now and get your money back."

You are instructed on how to sit, how to hold your motivator -- let it dangle from the wrist like a bracelet until you need it--and how to brake the mule. When the mules stop they should face outward toward the canyon's edge. This is desirable because if a mule is spooked, its instinct is to back up. You want to make sure your mule backs up away from the drop rather than into it. **Indeed!** You are not to get on or off the mule by yourself. If any problem should arise, you are to cry "Help!" And your guide will respond. You are also told in writing and reinforced by your guide verbally "If you cannot follow directions in English -- get out now and get your money back."

The trail is quite narrow. Because there is no room for both a person and a mule to pass, hikers are warned to stand back against the canyon wall and let the mules pass. Hikers are further warned not to move suddenly and spook the mules. The trail is also rough -- often deeply pitted and stoney. You are told the mules are surefooted. Your guide promises you: "No one has been lost in 90 years. The mules know what they are doing and so do I." Hmmm. As one rider noted: “This was comforting -- to an extent. But can't a mule have an occasional off day?”

What would draw someone to take a mule ride down the side of the Grand Canyon and back up again? (You do have to get back out of the canyon of course.) You would do it certainly to see one of the most spectacular natural wonders of the world. You might do it for the sheer adventure and experience of it all.

But then I think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her ride to Bethlehem. Once she had said yes to the angel and to God, she signed on for a trip with no way out. No chance to "get out now" and get her money back.

During this Christmas season our congregation has been exploring the theme *The Christmas You Have Always Longed For*. Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been our guide. We have pondered Mary's incredible trust in God. Though she would be open to people's whispers, accusations and judgements she trusted God with her life and with the life of the baby who would be born to her. On her ride to Bethlehem she had unqualified trust in God -- her guide. He knew every pitfall she might encounter on her journey -- every rough spot and every precipice. She believed God, as her guide, knew what He was doing. "I am the Lord's servant," she had said. There was no other way she would have embarked on such a journey.

Mary was young and probably accustomed to riding, but she was also eight or nine months pregnant. I am amazed she didn't deliver the child long before she reached her destination. True, she wasn't travelling down the Grand Canyon, but Mary's journey must have been as uncomfortable. But her trust in a trustworthy God turned any fearful gaze at the uncertain roadway to the certainty that God had called her to carry this child now moving within her. She knew God's hand was on her life.

Our congregation this Christmas has also been considering what it would mean for us to slow down and reflect a little more especially at this Christmas time -- even during the Christmas rush. Mary, for instance, was able to take a three-month retreat in the countryside with her relative Elizabeth. Having just discovered her life was being turned upside down with the unexpected and unusual conception (to say the least!) of the baby Jesus, Mary had a lot to ponder. My hunch is that her retreat with Elizabeth helped her think through the possible circumstances that could come up in the future as a result of this highly unusual birth. Her retreat also helped her even more to trust God, especially for when the going would get really difficult. It's not likely you or I can take a three month-sabbatical but I suspect we could find some opportunity -- a little more time than normal -- this Christmas to slow down the hecticness of our external and our internal pace. Maybe for you that occasion is right now.

Our congregation has also wondered this Christmas what it might mean for us to focus, not on the edges but on the centre of our Christmas celebrations -- the centre being the person of Jesus himself. That's the ultimate reason, isn't it, for Mary to take this mule ride to Bethlehem? After all, she was carrying God's son.

Remember the Scripture this evening from the Gospel of Luke:

And the angel said unto the shepherds, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a **Saviour**, which is Christ the Lord."

Incredible really -- so much to think about! It was the kind statement/experience Mary kept in her heart to ponder and ponder.

Some of you heard this story a few weeks ago. But I believe it bears repeating tonight. During the great Depression in the 1930s, a young family was struggling to make ends meet. One day news came that the circus was coming to town. It was going to cost only a \$1 to get in. Billy wanted to go so badly but his father couldn't afford to give him even a dollar. But, he told Billy, if he went out and did some odd jobs, he might make enough money to purchase a ticket on his own. Having never been to the circus before, Billy found enough work to earn the dollar to buy a ticket.

The day finally arrived when the circus came to town. Clutching his ticket proudly, Billy rushed down to Main Street and stood on the curb as the circus parade went by. The clowns,

the elephants, all of the performers in the circus thrilled him as he watched them march down the street. A clown came dancing over to him and Billy put his ticket into the clown's hand. He stood there on the curb as the rest of the circus characters made their way to the big tent. After they had all gone by, he rushed home and told his father how much fun it was. Surprised Billy was home already his father, asked him to describe the circus. Billy told his dad about the long and colourful procession that wound its way along Main Street. Then the father sadly took Billy in his arms and said: "Son, you didn't see the real circus. All you saw was the parade!"

Many of us rush about and work so hard in this Christmas season merely to see the trees, the lights, the toys and other presents, the decorations and the dinner – all only symbols of the real celebration. Many see the parade but miss the awesome event and the true meaning behind those festive signs. On her ride to Bethlehem Mary understood the difference between watching the parade and experiencing the awesome event the parade announced/heralded. Let us all be sure to understand too and go to the main event – rather than only watching the same parade again and again.

In the December 19th page from the devotional guide Our Daily Bread, is this following thought about what the birth of Jesus meant:

"Let us avoid the temptation to make our Christmas worship a withdrawal from the stress and sorrow of life into a realm of unreal beauty. It was into the real world that Jesus came, into the city where there was no room for Him and into a country where Herod, the murderer of innocents was King.

Jesus comes to us, not to shield us from the harshness of the world but to give us the courage and strength to bear it; not to snatch us away by some miracle from the conflict of life, but to give us peace – His peace – in our hearts, by which we may be calmly steadfast while the conflict rages, and be able to bring to the torn world the healing that is peace."

Mary would understand that. Because she was bearing Jesus who is also called Emmanuel – which means "God with us." And God will be with us too in all our experiences in life, whether they are times of exaltation or times of depression, whether they are mountain tops or valleys, whether we are up or down. He comes to us when life is bright with stars, or grim in stables. Jesus came to encourage us, to be a friend who rejoices when we rejoice and weeps when we weep. Christmas is not about presents, but about a presence – God's presence. Jesus gets down to earth to be God among us. If you have ever doubted that God would break into our lonely selves, don't doubt it now; not at Christmas.

Let us have a trust in God like Mary. To the degree that we focus on Christ Jesus and what his coming into the world means we will experience the Christmas we have always longed for – a Christmas of love (God's amazing love in the birth of Jesus) and a Christmas of deep peace and great joy!

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward everyone.

God is with us! Joy and peace to **you** this Christmas! Joy and peace to the world! Amen.
Rev Chris Miller Christmas Eve 2007