

## **“God’s Great Trip”**

Today we are probably beginning one of the busiest weeks of the year. Christmas Day is almost upon us, and part of the “busy-ness” which will engulf us may well be the need to **travel**. Traveling home. Traveling to Mom and Dad. Traveling to visit the grandchildren. Traveling to vistas of vacation to escape the winter snow. My opinion is that the **older** we get – the **less** we love winter! Traveling – Christmas is the traveling time of the year for many people – at least in North America . . . .

That may be one reason for the **appeal** of the Christmas Story! There is a lot of **traveling** bound up with it! Indeed, if you look carefully at the Story in all its fullness, you will find that there are **no less than 8 trips attached to it**, and that’s not to count the greatest trip of all – “God’s Great Trip”! Some of these are **more** familiar to us than others; some have yet to make our Christmas Carol List. Some are taken in **joy** and **gladness** – others are **backgrounded** with haste and fear! But they are all there – in the story of Christmas! So – consider . . . . .

The Christmas **traveling begins** with the angel **Gabriel**, who is sent on a mission to “a virgin named **Mary**”, to tell her the fantastic news that, **although** she “knows” no man, through the power of the Spirit of God, she will **conceive** and **bear** a Child, God’s Son! What a **trip** to make! What a **message** to deliver! The Supernatural is **invading** the natural in a moment of time! And **what** a birth! But with God, “nothing shall be impossible”!

Then another angel appears to **Joseph**, to whom this Virgin is **promised** in marriage. Such a trip is to **assure** Joseph, the troubled suitor that, yes indeed, “God works in **mysterious ways** His wonders to perform”! Do **not** desert Mary at this time, **take her** for your wife as planned! Name the Child – **Jesus** – for this is His specific vocation under God – “to save His people from their sins”.

The traveling continues - now the most important trip in the Story is taken. **Mary and Joseph leave Nazareth**, to go up to Bethlehem, to be **registered** for the purposes of Roman taxation! The ordinary and the mundane are utilized to effect God’s divine and holy purpose; it brings them

to the “city of David” – to Bethlehem – and there – their Child is born .

Now it is the turn of some **shepherds** to travel. They leave their sheep on the Galilean hillsides and hasten to **Bethlehem**, to the **crude** stable where the Child has been born! They come on a trip **to confirm** the strange sights and sounds they have beheld in the **skies above** as they “kept watch over their flocks by night”.

They **come** “with haste” and **find** Mary, and Joseph, and their newborn Child. They **gaze with wonder** upon this little One, whose **advent** has caused the heavens **to open**, and angel voices **to sing** in praise of God’s glory! For a time, their heads are “in the clouds” as well, as they **ponder** the events of the night. **But then** – it’s back to the fields, **back** to work! There’s work to be done. Yet their return is **far different** than their coming. They go from Bethlehem “glorying and praising God”. Their trip **in coming** in (obedient to the heavenly vision) and **in going** out (in praise of God) is surely a **model** for our comings and goings at Christmas!

Our Christmas traveling is **not done yet**. Now it is the turn of some **mysterious visitors** from the East - that is – from **outside** the land of Israel, the land God chose from the beginning to be the home of **His special people**, the children of **Abraham, Isaac and Jacob**. They are **not** Jews - they are **Gentiles!** They are on a journey as well – **searching** for the meaning of a **bright and unusual Star** that they have followed for some time now in the night skies. **Where** will it lead them? So far it has lead them through much **time** and over much **space** – now it brings them to **Bethlehem**. Their long journey had only **one purpose** – to worship and adore. They **bow down** and present to this Child of Mary their **precious gifts**, gifts that befit a King. Theirs is a **prophetic act** of the tribute that all peoples will someday bring to Jesus . . . the Christ Child!

But now the **peacefulness** of this **tender scene** of humble adoration is **broken** by the **real world** in which this birth has taken place. There are **others who think themselves** kingly and wise, and worthy of the obedience of common folk, like you and me. **Their heirs still live and move** in our world today. For them – this Child is a **threat** to their temporal power! So the **Herod** of the day seeks **to kill** the baby Jesus. This almost overnight, the Holy Family have been turned into **refugees** in their own country, thrust out

upon a perilous journey to escape, **traveling** against a background of pain **and bloodshed**, and the cries of others, whose children have been **slaughtered** before their eyes. The so-called “real world” has **sought again** to snuff out the invasion of the divine!

**So – it is Egypt again** who provides a sanctuary for God’s purposes, and God’s people! But when it is known that the oppressor – **King Herod** – is dead, **Mary and Joseph and the Child return** to Nazareth. Their trip is a joyous home-coming!

**These are the trips that are more or less familiar to us** at Christmas. They are all found in Holy Scripture. But there is **yet one more**, and it really **lies beyond them all**. It is God’s trip, “**God’s great Trip**”! It is in accordance with **His purposes** that all this has happened. His is **not** a trip to **announce**, nor a trip to **register** at the whim of some Caesar, nor a trip to **confirm**, nor to **adore**, least of all **to destroy**! It is **a trip to become as one of us**. God has become as one of us **in the Person** of His Beloved Son. Says the writer of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel - “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” God has become as one of us in the Person of His Beloved Son – **yet without sin**! The “Word” is **Incarnation** - such is the **mystery and miracle** that we ponder anew at this time every year.

God did **not** send us a **manuscript**, or an angelic **messenger**, or a **prophet**. No – **He sent His only begotten Son**! He did not “**play it safe**” in some warm and secure heavenly castle, from which He **once in a while** would look down upon this poor struggling **earth in all its brokenness**, or us in our **personal struggles to make sense** of the unexpected vagaries of human living. No – He **risked** His life in the streets, **upon** this earth, **against** the threat of a journey that “**one bad move**” could have ended it abruptly; against the threat of **crude accommodation** fit only for beasts, against the threat of a **zealous Herod** who thought he was the “King of the Jews”!

He did all this **because He loved us**, not because we first loved Him or deserved such great grace as He has shown us in His Beloved Son – “in whom I am well-pleased”! No – **He sent us the “best of” saviours**, Jesus the Christ, the only – begotten Son of God, God’s love incarnate!

In what days remain before us, before Christmas 2016 arrives on the

calendar, in the midst of shepherds and angels, Wise Men, stable, and Sheep, Herod's wrath and Mary's humble obedience – **let us not miss** the message of God's "Great Trip" – **Incarnation**: God has **become** as one of us, He has **joined** himself to us **out of love that has no equal!** In the midst of the **turkey** with all the trimmings, the **puddings** and **cakes** and **Christmas cheer** – let us not miss "**the reason for the Season**" – that in this Christ Child, **the mighty God** of heaven and earth, **the Creator** of all that is and was and ever shall be, **the Supreme Judge** of human life and history– **has come to us**, and lived among us, and died for us!

**What can** such a divine trip mean to us? It means that God has **identified Himself** with us for good. It means that we **need not waste** our time looking for "**modern**" Saviours; we **have** a Saviour! And He **confronts** us in Jesus. It means that He **knows** what it is to be human – He **feels** our anguish, He **shares** our joy. He is **Emmanuel** - "God with us" - today, tomorrow, and forever . . .

And it means that **God has begun His great plan** of redemption, of **taking back to himself that which** is His from the beginning. It will entail a **costly price** – **but He will pay it for us**. Yes – "the Word was **made flesh**" and made His dwelling among us" - but He was **also made sin** for us, that we might be a **forgiven** and **free** people, and His **dwelling place**, in this community, and elsewhere, in this world.

God's great trip **illustrates** and **confirms** His love for us, in whatever state we find ourselves on this last Sunday **before** Christmas arrives for another year. He has **assured** us that our future is with Him; that there is **salvation** in no other **Person**, or **Word**, or **Idea**, or **Act**; and that He **awaits** our acceptance – for "as many as received Him, to them gave He **power** to become children of God, even to them who **believe** in His Name . . .".

**AMEN**