

Christmas Eve 2011
On Walking: Christmas Eve Thoughts
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Tonight, I am just going to accept the story, not argue with it. Some two thousand years ago, a subject people in Palestine, occupied by an imperial power, was forced into motion, propelled to take a journey by a tax decree from Rome; this entailed travelling to your home town to work out what had been left to you as an inheritance, and then taxes were levied based on its assessed value. To comply with this tax edict, we read that Joseph and Mary traveled south from the Galilee up north down to Bethlehem 80 miles away. Who knows how many other individuals, couples and families were making similar journeys to ancestral homes? What we are told in Luke's gospel story is that travelers' lodgings in Bethlehem were all rented out—no room at the inn for Joseph and Mary, that Mary gave birth to her first-born son and placed the infant in a trough used for feeding livestock—that's what a manger is—and from this we guess that, arriving in Bethlehem with no place to stay, Mary, Joseph and Jesus roughed it in a stable or barn. And the rest...is a glorious, troubling and moving mixture of myth, history and faith.

Tonight, I want to think of this story as something that began, and could only have taken place, when a couple, expecting a child, set forth on a journey down a dirt road on foot. It's a story about walking—that “profound and ancient human endeavor that creates a relationship between body, world and the imagination.” (Rebecca Solnit) On foot, a person walks about 3-4 miles an hour; 20 miles is a good day's journey—so let's say with a very pregnant Mary it took the couple five or six days to walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem; It's semi-arid, hilly country, strewn with limestone; scored with ravines and narrow valleys. For millennia, farmers have terraced the steeply sloping hills to create thin slivers of thick, arable red-brown soil where they plant and

tend small orchards of fruit and olive trees. Above—the vaulting pure blue skies: bright sun, star strewn skies. To my eyes, it was and is a strikingly beautiful landscape.

I have no idea exactly what they were thinking about—Joseph and Mary—but having once been between homes for a number of weeks and camping in a park under the open skies with my spouse and two small kids, believe me, striking out from home, setting off down the road focuses the attention on immediate needs—food, shelter for the night, trying to make things as comfortable as possible, assuaging anxieties and fears about what the next day and the day after that may bring. Those pressing needs, however, once basically satisfied, are not ever present; and it’s the human activity of walking—a homeless little family on a trail in the woods thirty years ago, or 2000 years ago: a couple, a pregnant woman and her spouse, walking south to Bethlehem—it’s when we walk with the earth beneath our feet at 3-4 miles an hour, that *brings to mind* a completely different world of possibility, peril and promise.

“The longest journey begins with a single step,” Lao Tzu writes in the *Tao Te Ching*. The journey of Christmas down to this very evening, and this very place, began with one step, with a couple setting out from the town of Nazareth in a remote Roman province on the far side of the Mediterranean so long ago. Likewise the human journey out of Africa and the peopling of the earth that began 85,000 years ago. Think about it: “The animal kingdom has nothing else quite like us—this column of flesh and bone, this proud unsteady tower always in danger of toppling over....Walking is a unique activity during which the body, step-by-step, teeters on the edge of catastrophe...only the forward movement of first one leg and then the other keeps us from falling flat on our face.” (John Napier, quoted in Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, p. 33)

There is something marvelous about that movement of feet and legs that enables a journey to take place—a labour of the body that produces thoughts, experiences, departures and

arrivals. Step-by-step down the road, threshold and hearth of home fade away and a new landscape emerges—thoughts engage, the imagination soars. “Me thinks that the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow,” wrote Henry David Thoreau in his classic essay “Walking.” *Solvitur ambulando*, St. Jerome was fond of saying. To solve a problem, walk around. Was it that slow, steady forward movement on foot through the hilly landscape and narrow valleys of Palestine that engaged their thoughts and hearts and called forth a world of untold possibility—of catastrophe and glory—to the minds of Mary and Joseph as they made their way to Bethlehem? Was it on foot, on that four day journey, that Mary began to make sense of the premonitions and portents about her yet-to-be born child? Was it on foot, walking down the road to Bethlehem, when Joseph realized his responsibility to really care for his wife and the infant they were bringing into that troubled land and those troubled times? I don’t know, none of us do; but I can imagine that it would go something like that. No matter the time and distance of thought and culture, there are enduring things we share; we upright walkers, lovers, and dreamers.

“The rhythm of walking,” writes Rebecca Solnit, “generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts.... It is the movement, as well as the sights going by, that seems to make things happen in the mind, and this is what makes walking endlessly fertile.” (Solnit, 5-6) Shepherds in the hills with their flocks, labourers in the fields, Roman soldiers tramping down the road... poor villages, subject people, imperial grandeur and brute force—it was a storied landscape, austere and beautiful, it was a troubled countryside haunted with mythic tales of exodus, of glory and catastrophe through which Mary and Joseph travelled on that four day journey. And step-by-step

through this land... perhaps it was here that gave rise to the ideas, the emotions that found such eloquent voice in Mary when later she is depicted as having exclaimed:

My soul doth magnify the Lord....
For he hath regarded : the lowliness of his handmaiden.
...he hath magnified me : and holy is his name...
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted the humble and meek.
He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away.
He, remembering his mercy, hath helped his servant Israel : as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever....

Walking works that kind of wonder on the mind.

Walking because is slow and inefficient; it is resistant to false urgency and speed. It is a friend to those who want to amble, saunter and talk. Years of walking, I think, suggest to me that my mind, like my feet, works best at about three miles an hour. Traffic rushes by, technologies in service to information and consumption multiply—modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought and thoughtfulness.

In closing, let me just say this, a truism no doubt, but this Christmas Eve, I think it well to share it any way—if we're seeking creative ideas, if we're yearning for good conversation and companionship, if we don't know how or think we've forgotten but want to offer up a prayer anyway—let's go for a walk, stride out down the road toward a Bethlehem, for "angels whisper to the person who goes for a walk." It's good to have an end to journey towards; but it's the journey that truly matters in the end.