

Walking in Love
An Advent Meditation
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Seventy miles is quite the distance when you are on foot. I think it would even feel like a long way on a donkey or a colt. Walking seventy miles would be like stepping outside of our sanctuary and making your way to Winston Salem. You would probably need several days and nights for the journey. Walking is a great form of exercise for children and adults. Doctors and other health experts agree that walking is both a great form of cardiovascular exercise and a wonderful way to improve your mood. Walking provides an opportunity for the mind to wander and the eyes get to take in God's beautiful scenery one step at a time instead of at 55 miles per hour. Walking can be good therapy for the soul.

Mary and Joseph were tasked with making a seventy mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order for Joseph to fulfill a government mandate. Everyone had to travel to their place of birth in order to be registered. I think the ruling government of that day wanted to make sure every citizen had a chance to pay their taxes on time. We just saw Mary and Joseph make their way to Bethlehem this morning as two of our beautiful children made their way down the center aisle of our sanctuary. Their effort to re-enact the walk of a carpenter and his pregnant fiancée was priceless. Can you imagine the two of them walking 70 miles together, walking through the weather, the heat of the day and the dark of the night. Our sanctuary to Winston Salem, Nazareth to Bethlehem, no matter how you measure the distance, 70 miles is a long walk. I am pleased to believe that the two of them, Mary and Joseph, shared a love for one another as they made that long walk. I also believe they had love for the baby that was growing in Mary's womb. The tiny baby-to-be who would be called Jesus. In some sense, I believe they also held and shared a love for God as they walked those seventy miles. They were walking in love. They were walking with a purpose. Some would say that the purpose for the walk was love. A love for humanity expressed by the infinite Love we call God.

All the walking experienced by Mary and Joseph caused me to reflect on other important stories of walking that consistently impact the human condition. My mind scanned over a dozen important walks as I considered this message for you during the week. For the purpose of my Advent meditation, I will share three of my walking musings with you.

Walking in love part 1. When a baby is born, the parents, the grandparents and all the family friends love to gather and gaze upon the hope and promise that are evident in a newborn's face. The tiny infant grows rapidly when proper nutrition and parental nurturing are available. After a few months, the once nearly immobile child is eager to crawl from one end of its blanket to the other as it searches for a toy or anything else that catches her eye. We have been privileged to watch a number of babies go through this process here on the floors of our church. The first I was pleased to spy was a little boy named Josh who was followed later by a sister named Allie. Later, there was a Max and an Annika on this crawling journey. In more recent years we watched Lillian and baby Cooper begin this merry movement. Just two Vacation Bible Schools ago wise Jonathan joined the ranks of the crawlers at Binkley. And then, to Leandra's and everyone else's great delight, baby Pasha began to crawl to and fro on the floors of our offices and sanctuary. All the crawling these little ones undertook was nature's

way of strengthening their feet, ankles, calves and thighs as they prepared themselves for the day when a new method of transportation would reach their grasp. One day, usually somewhere between 11 and 13 months of life, the little baby has an urge to rise up on some piece of furniture or extended hand and stand on two feet. Then, with fear and trembling, at least on the part of the watchful parent, the little one takes a step or two and engages in what most of us would call walking. One foot in front of the other, one leg raised slightly and one knee slightly bent and sure enough walking has occurred. Mothers are delighted, fathers are proud and grandparents are called or texted with the remarkable news. The child has walked, pedestrian locomotion has begun. The little one may not know it at the time, but she has not simply been walking, she has begun walking in love. The parents have been extending love to that baby every step of the way. Walking in love will encourage the baby as she becomes a toddler and moves through every phase of her life. It has been our joy to see it occur in so many children at this church. Eventually we know their walking will lead them to roles as shepherds, inn keepers, angels and even Mary and Joseph.

Walking in love part 2. At approximately the age of 18 something remarkable happens for many young people in our society. After laboring and studying and growing through kindergarten, elementary school, middle school and four years of high school, after praying a blessing over snack time, bounding playfully at recess, gazing longingly at romance and wrestling mightily with Advanced Placement courses, our recently crawling baby is ready to take a walk across the floor of a local gymnasium. This short walk in physical distance is truly immeasurable. As the graduating senior makes his way toward the principal to receive a well deserved graduation diploma, he is not actually walking alone. He or she is walking in love and with love. The love of a parent who has offered encouragement and presence over years of rugged terrain and emotional pain. The love of a teacher who has offered training and confidence for a fledgling student over the course of their education. And the love of God which has been inescapably written on the heart of every child who calls life a gift. The remarkable graduating senior is walking in love.

And finally, Walking in love part 3. At a certain time, at a certain age, at a certain place in the cosmic structure of eternity, a walk occurs that is indescribable for people like me. I cannot describe this walk very well because I have only seen it from a cloudy, distant point of view. The walk I am hinting at is a walk from this world into the next. For most of our earthly lives we are allowed the satisfaction of walking on solid ground. We are given a multitude of choices and uncountable experiences in our lifetime. We walk through childhood, puberty, young adulthood, maturity, and eventually life with a membership in AARP. All this time that we are walking through life, we who call ourselves followers of Jesus, are afforded the luxury of walking in love. The same God whom Jesus called Abba, papa, loving parent, is also our walking partner. Therefore, it is my belief and hope, that when we walk beyond the 70 mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, when we walk beyond this world of immense possibilities and intense anxieties, we walk into the abiding presence of the author of all reality. We walk in love and into love as we journey from this world to the next. It is this unfathomable reality or fathomable dream that enables me to find great joy in the story of Christ's birth which we observed again today. Mary and Joseph walked with pregnant hope around them and within them as they followed a course foretold by messengers of great tidings. We are tasked with telling these tidings of joy and love again and again as followers of Jesus. I am grateful to our children for walking us through this gospel prelude today. They are truly walking in love. My prayerful hope is that they will continue the 70 mile walk and experience all the dreams and destinies that God is calling them to behold. Thanks be to God, for allowing and encouraging us to walk in love.