

The Journey to Bethlehem

We often forget that the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was around 100 miles. Walking at 4 miles an hour is just below a jogging pace. There is no way that Mary — in her final weeks of pregnancy — could move that quickly! A more likely pace would be 2 miles an hour. If they traveled for ten hours a day, then the journey would take 5 days. However, 20 miles a day is still a lot! So it may well have taken them a week or even two weeks!

We read in *The Life of Mary As Seen by the Mystics*, that “on a cold, wet, mid-winter morning, the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph set out from Nazareth on their journey to Bethlehem. Mary was mounted side-saddle on a little donkey, and St. Joseph guided the animal. Two bags, hanging on the beast’s right side contained their provisions: some bread, fruit and fish, and the linens which Mary had lovingly prepared for her baby.” God’s Providence did not spoil or pamper them! The Babe could have been, but would not be born in Mary’s home town of Nazareth. Instead she had to suffer a horrendous open-air journey in mid-winter down to Bethlehem! God chastises those whom He loves!

We read further that: “The first evening they found themselves in a windy, uninhabited valley. After a long day on the rough road, the Blessed Virgin, who was suffering keenly from the cold, told St. Joseph that they would have to stop there for the night. So he pitched their little tent under a great old turpentine tree near a fountain. God miraculously warmed Mary and she placed her hands in her husband’s to share the warmth with him. Then they took some supper. Poor St. Joseph was very kind to Mary, and suffered much to see her in pain. He tried to cheer her by describing enthusiastically the excellent lodging they were sure to have in Bethlehem.” Here we see a typical day on the road that Mary would suffer!

“The next morning at half-past-five they went on. By noon the donkey became tired, so Mary dismounted and continued on foot. Soon they arrived at a farm and rested a while. After another hour’s climb through the hills, they came to a fine-looking inn comprising several buildings with gardens. Here they were received by the owner’s wife, and remained all the next day, as it was the Sabbath. Some women with their children came to visit Mary and were deeply impressed by her wisdom and reserve. They were also very touched when they watched her instruct their children in religion. She explained it to the little ones so lovingly that they could not take their eyes away from her face. St. Joseph spent the afternoon walking through the gardens with his host, whom he greatly edified by his simple speech and piety.”



“The following day they traveled over twelve miles and spent the night with some hospitable shepherds. On this trip they avoided the great, crowded caravan roads as much as possible, and also they detoured around the city of Jerusalem to the east, though this took them much longer. The next night, in a cold rain, they came to an isolated house. St. Joseph knocked on the door and asked for shelter. Without opening, the heartless man inside shouted that he was not running an inn and they should leave him alone! They went on until they found a shed, where Joseph prepared a resting place for Mary. Then he fed the donkey, and after a light supper and prayers they took a few hours’ sleep.”



Another “night they spent in a large farmhouse, though the owner’s wife, who was young and conceited, treated them coldly because she was jealous of Mary’s beauty. Here St. Joseph was warned that Bethlehem was very crowded, but he replied that he had friends there and was quite sure of being well received. Toward the end of the trip they made many stops, as Mary found traveling more and more difficult.

Finally they arrived at Bethlehem and made their way through the crowds to a large building where the public officials were taking the census and levying taxes. St. Joseph went into a big room, where he was asked his name and occupation. He replied that he owned no property, but lived from his manual labor.”

“Then they began to look for a lodging. While Mary waited at the end of a street, Joseph went down it from house to house, knocking at the doors of his relatives and acquaintances, but he was admitted nowhere and in many places he met with harsh refusals and insults. Each time he came back to Mary, he was more and more upset. She knew that the hearts and houses of men were to be closed to them. Although to expose her condition at her young age to the public gaze was more painful to her modesty than their failure to find a lodging, still she meekly followed her husband through the crowds. Many stared at her as she sat there so patiently and humbly, with her head lowered. Finally, about nine o’clock, St. Joseph came back, utterly overcome, crying and trembling with heartbreaking sorrow. Mary consoled him tenderly. Then he told her of a shepherds’ shelter outside the town. And she said: ‘That will be perfectly satisfactory to me. Let us lovingly embrace poverty, dear Joseph, and go gladly wherever the Lord guides us’.

Upon entering the bare grotto she immediately set about cleaning the cave with her own hands, out of humility and reverence. St. Joseph helped, and then he started a fire, as it was very cold. After a frugal supper, they awaited the birth of Jesus.”

