

How Far Is It to Bethlehem?

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Journey is a key word in the Christian community. People use it often while referring to their experiences and growth in faith.

This time of year, when we focus on the beginning of Jesus' journey on Earth, it seems especially appropriate to ask: "How Far Is It to Bethlehem?"

How do we measure such a thing?
Is it in miles? Years? Suffering? Or do we measure it in hope, grace, and love?

As you read about journeys, ministries, and faith in the following pages, we invite you to ask yourself, "How Far Is It to Bethlehem?" On your journey, may God bring you a blessed and merry Christmas.

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In the barn loft on his ranch near Manhattan, Kansas, my cousin has constructed a sign post showing the number of kilometers to places he has traveled—the Ganges, Sri Lanka, Paris, Vatican City, Mombasa, Algiers, Zagreb and many more. Near the middle is a marker that reads 10,769 kilometers (6,691.5 miles) to סָרִיד (Sarid), a kibbutz, where he worked and lived in northern Israel, just a few kilometers from Nazareth.

He and his daughter were in Bethlehem in 1999 on the final Christmas Eve of the last millennium. In her journal she wrote:

The city was smelly, dirty and didn't have many amenities. Once we found Manger Square, it was a beehive.... There were many reporters (the newspaper said over 1,000). There was also a parade. The Church of the Nativity was full.... It took us a long time to get into the grotto where Jesus was born. There were candles, people singing, and people kissing and praying. In the city center we saw Yasser Arafat go into the mosque. Yasser's wife is Christian, so they went to the Church of the Nativity after the mosque.

Bethlehem is in the central West Bank, Palestine, about 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) south of Jerusalem. Other cities named Bethlehem sit in Namibia, New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland, Wales and at least seven other countries. At least 28 USA cities are named Bethlehem. One is a township of 826 people only 144 kilometers (89.7 miles) from our Temple, dedicated to the pursuit of peace in Independence, Missouri.

The most familiar Bethlehem in the USA was founded on Christmas Eve 1741. David Nitschmann and Count Nicolaus Zinzendorf led a group of Moravians along the banks of Monocacy Creek in the colony of Pennsylvania, where they set up missionary communities among Native Americans and unchurched German-speaking Christians. Zinzendorf said:

Brothers, how more fittingly could we call our new home than to name it in honor of the spot where the event we now commemorate took place. We will call this place Bethlehem.

How far will it be to Bethlehem for you this Christmas Eve? How far is it from where you sit or stand to the place that commemorates the incarnation of the one who pitched his tent among us; the one whose flesh shone like light? How far will you go this Christmas season to one more time make the pilgrimage with Mary and Joseph and the unborn child from Nazareth to Bethlehem?

Nazareth to Bethlehem is a journey of 157.1 kilometers (97.6 miles), a 2-hour, 10-minute drive down the Yitzhak Rabin Highway. Or, it's a week-long trek on foot on the Nativity Trail. Not easy, but you can do it. Closed for several years because of the Second Intifada and expansion of Jewish settlements, the trail reopened in 2008 with an altered route to avoid the logistical difficulties of movement between Israel and the West Bank.

The pilgrimage from Nazareth to Bethlehem gets increasingly difficult, but you still can do it. We can all do it again this year.

How far is it to Bethlehem? Several long flights, military checkpoints, border crossings, passport reviews, and visa stamps. It is the distance of language barriers, conflicting beliefs, and the clash of histories through the eyes of "winners" and "losers."

How far is it to Bethlehem? About 2025 years according to scholars who've calculated the birth year of our Lord.

But, maybe it isn't all about the distance in kilometers, or years, or hours of travel and checkpoints. Maybe the "how far to Bethlehem?" can be measured differently.

At the April 2019 World Conference, Apostle Rick Maupin stood at the lectern in the Auditorium to express his deep gratitude as he stepped away from his role in the Council of Twelve Apostles and as a full-time minister in Community of Christ. He shared the following with delegates that day:

At the closing service of the 1980 World Conference I sat in the east balcony, above the transverse aisle. At that time I had not been baptized and confirmed in this faith community. The distance between where I now stand

and where I sat in 1980 can be measured in meters, about 25 to 30. The distance between where I now stand and where I sat in 1980 also can be measured in years, nearly 39. However, the space between where I now stand and where I sat in 1980 is not about meters or years. That space is filled with many of you... That space is measured in relationships—relationships with thousands of sisters and brothers around the world.

How far is it to Bethlehem? How far is it to encounter with the Christ child? Father Richard Rohr, in a reflection posted November 9, 2016, offered insights resonant with those shared by Apostle Maupin:

The incarnation of God did not only happen in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. That is just when some of us started taking it seriously. The incarnation actually happened approximately 13.8 billion years ago with a moment that we now call "The Big Bang" or the First Manifestation. At the birth of our universe, God materialized and revealed who God is.

Rohr goes on to quote American theologian Ilia Delio, who wrote:

Human life must be traced back to the time when life was deeply one, a Singularity, whereby the intensity of mass-energy exploded into consciousness.

I'm fascinated by the meanings of the word Bethlehem: בֵּית לֶחֶם, "House of Bread" in Hebrew; مَحَلّ تَيْب, "House of Meat" in Arabic. House of meat: incarnation, carne, meat, flesh. God took on flesh and dwelt among us. House of Bread: bread of life, "I am the bread of life... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:48, 51 NRSV).

The late Marcus Borg, a New Testament theologian, wrote:

Jesus enfleshes, embodies, incarnates, God's Word, God's revelation, God's character and passion in a human life. Christmas means that for Christians, Jesus is and should be decisive. What we see in him, the Word made flesh, is our revelation, our light in the darkness... There is no linear timeline in learning about the first Christmas.

How far is it? How far is it from your head to your heart? How far to travel to hold the miracle of a newborn in your arms? How far from the chair or the couch to "behold the Savior at your door?" How far from the outwardly distorted life of a troubled soul in front of you to the deeper revelation that this is "Child

of God," "Beloved Son?" How far from barrenness and empty blackness to an essential energy symbolized by a star over a manger; an "ascensional force of the world," as Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, described it?

**But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.**


—Micah 5:2 NRS

How far is it? An eon? A millennium? A lifetime? From this Christmas Eve to the next? Thirty-nine years and 30 meters from a spectator's seat in the balcony to words of gratitude from a church leader for so many sacred relationships around the world? From the end of this sentence to the sound of peace-filled silence radiating from that all-encompassing Mystery that surrounds and pervades?

When I lived in Mexico I met a sister in Christ who lived with her family in one of our church buildings along the USA-Mexico border. They were the caretakers and generous givers of hospitality. Her name was Belén—the Spanish word for Bethlehem. I wonder why her parents chose that name. I wonder how that name impacted her growing-up years. "I have called you by your name. You are Bethlehem."

What if we all took that name this Christmas? What is your name? Who are you? "I am Belén. I am Bethlehem. I am the birthplace of the Messiah this Christmas. I may be one of the little clans, the runt of the litter, but I will shelter the Prince of Peace this Christmas. I am crowded, chaotic, and busy this Christmas, but I'll find a place, I'll be a place of welcome for wanderers, sojourners, and curious onlookers who want to meet this child. I am Bethlehem. Bethlehem is here.

There is a linear timeline and a measurable distance from where you and I are now to get to Bethlehem of Judea, Bethlehem of Ephrathah. But to get to Christmas Eve, to make the annual pilgrimage, is a different kind of space, a different kind of time. As hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray expresses it in Community of Christ Sings 418, "No Obvious Angels":

...Christmas comes into the here and the now through star-sighted people, the watchful and hopeful, who wake us to see a new world... Christmas comes into the here and the now through peace-maker people, the just and the gentle, the stars who will light the new world. 

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stockings, we need to stand and pronounce a new way. When our newspapers says we must 'take back Christmas because some imaginary people are trying to take carols out of schools' we must recognise that this is an attempt to bring fear and separation between us, and then we must stand in solidarity, providing a new example, one which isn't filled with fear or judgment or separation, but in compassion, humility and love. When we fail to see the hope and joy in story and song, that's when we begin to dismantle who we are. When we try to explain stories as facts, things which are not meant to be taken literally, we lose ourselves. Our thirst for knowledge has created an apprehension to use our imagination. But if we embrace our history, our heritage, our ability to see the wisdom in story, we will once again embrace the wisdom of myth and parable. You don't need to believe something is 'real' to know it holds wisdom and truth. Our challenge right now at this time of year is to put aside the things that separate us, the things which create borders between us and those things that diminish the human spirit. Let us see each other. All the people.

In our increasingly secular world, maybe the joy of Christmas is in our ability to slow down, take stock, breathe and see each other. Breathe in what's important to us – family, friends, creation, food, love. It's our time to slow down and tell stories of mythical creatures and characters and embrace their joy and message. It's times like this we can chat with a random stranger in the street or in a store and share good conversation. Perhaps it's a time when you can sit and share stories with your people around your table.

When I tell stories to Pippa, I am filled with an incredible joy. Not because I'm laughing at the fact that the cow jumped over the moon and how the heck is that ever going to happen, but because stories teach us that joy is found in sitting down and connecting our spirits together. Nothing else matters while a story is being told. Joy is found when we embrace one another, when we look into each other's eyes and see the good. When we pave the way for peace, we are building the way of peace. We pave with time. Stories require time. This Christmas, spend time. May your Christmas be filled with many moments of storytelling, of love and wonder. May your Christmas be filled with the magic and the joy of Jesus the Christ is my prayer.