

A Credit Card Number

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It was dark when Joseph led his donkey and his wife through the gate and into the village. Though few people were wandering the streets, he knew immediately how burdened Bethlehem was with humanity: the very air vibrated with the breathings, the low murmuring, and the talk of ten thousand people. But Mary had begun to glisten in the moonlight. More and more, she was leaning back against the ridge of her wooden saddle. It was time . . .

"A credit card number will hold your reservation past our 5 p.m. check-in time," the voice on the other end of the phone explains. I pull out my piece of plastic, recite the number, and book a hotel room. Just one of the first steps in planning an upcoming road trip for my wife and me.

I think about Mary and Joseph and their journey to Bethlehem. No gold card in the saddlebag. Instead, a message from God and a decree from Caesar were their preparation.

Today, we travel on paved roads, in vehicles with front wheel drive, anti-lock brakes, and airbags. We call the local motor club and order a map for our travel itinerary, or we simply use our on-board GPS to navigate. And Mary and Joseph? They carried a knapsack filled with linen cloth, salt, a lantern, and a knife (maybe).

Would I ever dare to travel in the final weeks of pregnancy? Would I ever journey with so little? For Mary and Joseph, the trip to Bethlehem was a journey of trust. Faith was their preparation. God's promise is what carried them to Bethlehem, to bear a son named Emanuel . . . God with us.