

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 24, 2010
Christmas Eve**

THE MOST INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Philippians 2:5-11

If the category on the TV game show *Jeopardy!* were “Classic Animal Stories,” and the answer is “Sheila Burnford,” what would the question be? If you said “Who wrote *The Incredible Journey?*”, you are correct. Published in 1961, *The Incredible Journey* is the touching tale of two dogs and a cat as they travel some 300 miles through the Canadian wilderness to be reunited with their owners. It was made into a Disney movie in 1963, and then remade in 1993 as *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey*. In the remake, the animals were given the ability to speak and converse with one another, with actors Michael J. Fox, Don Ameche, and Sally Field serving as their voices.

What these animals – in the book, a young Labrador retriever, an old English Bull Terrier, and a Siamese cat – experienced during their trek through the deeply-wooded wilderness of northwestern Ontario made it an “incredible journey.” The combination of surprise, relief and joy when the three make it home and are reunited with their human owners is heartwarming.

The Incredible Journey, of course, is a fictional story. I’ve been thinking recently about some “incredible journeys” that actually took place in history. For example, there is Abraham in the Bible, responding to the call of God to leave his home, his family and country to go only God knew where, to a place where God would lead him (Genesis 12). Hebrews 11:8 says: “By faith, Abraham obeyed and went, even though he didn’t know where he was going.” It sounds like an incredible journey of trust, of faith in God, to me.

Moses and the people of Israel took an incredible journey, too, in their exodus from Egypt, their crossing of the Red Sea on dry land, and, 40 years later, under the leadership of Moses’ successor Joshua, crossing the Jordan River into the land God had promised to give them. It sounds pretty incredible, but it’s true.

How about Pheidippides? Do you recognize his name? You won’t find him in the Bible. Pheidippides was a hero of ancient Greece. Exactly 2,500 years ago, in the year 490 BC, the army of Persia, 150,000 soldiers strong, invaded Greece. The armies of Greece and Persia met near the village of Marathon. According to Greek legend, when the Persians landed at Marathon, Pheidippides was sent to Sparta on foot to ask for help. He ran nearly 150 miles in two days to carry out his mission. Then, when the severely outnumbered Greek army miraculously defeated the Persians at Marathon, Pheidippides was dispatched to take the good news to Athens. He ran from Marathon to Athens, a distance of about 25 miles, announced that Greece was victorious, and then collapsed and died from exhaustion on the spot.

How much of this story is actually true is an unanswered question. It is, nonetheless, the story of an incredible journey. And the legend of Pheidippides lives on in the modern marathon,

which takes its name from Pheidippides' journey from the village of Marathon to Athens 2,500 years ago.

Closer to our time, a little more than 200 years ago, after President Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase, doubling the size of the United States at a price tag of \$15 million, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led an expedition to explore the vast new American territory. They traveled up the Missouri River from the Mississippi River all the way to Wyoming and Montana, and then continued through the Oregon territory all the way to the Pacific Ocean. They were aided immensely on their journey by a young native American woman named Sacagawea, who was invaluable to them as a guide, interpreter, and bridge-builder with the native American tribes they encountered. It was truly an incredible journey.

It was an incredible journey for Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin as the Apollo 11 astronauts landed their spaceship on the moon in July 1969, walked on the surface of the moon, and then reconnected with fellow astronaut Michael Collins for the flight back to earth. It was the fulfillment of President Kennedy's pledge in 1961 to put a man on the moon and return him safely to earth before the end of the 1960s. The NASA space program enabled us "to bravely go where no one (had) ever gone before." Incredible.

Here is another incredible journey: An engaged couple, not yet married, but as a result of extraordinary developments, she is pregnant, due to give birth sooner rather than later. Because of a census law passed in Rome, they are forced to make an 80-mile trip from the town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee, to the little town of Bethlehem, about five miles from Jerusalem, because Bethlehem is where the roots of their family tree are located. There was no bus service between Nazareth and Bethlehem. No trains or planes or taxis. The only way for ordinary folks was on foot. Or maybe by donkey. It was a terribly inconvenient time to make the journey. But it is the law, so they must. And they do. They barely make it to Bethlehem before it is time for her to give birth. Because of the Census, there are no rooms available anywhere in town. Everything is booked. The best they can do is a stable with smelly farm animals. There, at the end of an incredible journey, she gives birth to a son. They give Him the name Jesus, as an angel had earlier instructed them. She wraps the baby in swaddling cloths and uses a manger – a feeding trough for the animals – as a crib. Incredible. But true.

But there is a journey more incredible than any or all of these. It is what we celebrate tonight. It is not the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. It is the journey made by Jesus Himself in His incarnation: His journey from heaven to the womb of a young Jewish virgin and to a stable in Bethlehem, His life as a refugee with Mary and Joseph in Egypt, growing up in Nazareth, learning the carpenter's trade from Joseph, then carrying out an itinerant (traveling) public ministry of preaching the good news of God's kingdom, teaching people about God and His amazing grace, unfailing love and perfect will, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, liberating those held captive by evil spirits, even raising the dead. This incredible journey eventually took Him to a place called Golgotha, where they did to Him the worst thing they could do to a person. They crucified Him. They nailed His hands and feet to a wooden Roman cross. It was the cruelest and most painful form of execution permitted in the Roman empire. The agony of it is unimaginable.

The apostle Paul describes this incredible journey of Jesus in Philippians 2. It was a journey – really, a mission – of epic proportions and eternal significance. In this passage, we have one of the most theologically rich Christological statements in the whole Bible. It tells us of the preexistence of Christ (before His incarnation), His equality with God (because He *is, was, and always will be* fully God), His identification with us (by becoming fully human), the purpose of His incarnation (to die for us) and the suffering He endured on our behalf.

It tells us, as Alec Motyer says, that there was a “Jesus before Bethlehem” – God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, who existed long before He took on our flesh and blood and was born to Mary in Bethlehem. From all eternity, He was truly, fully God. In God’s perfect time, according to God’s perfect plan, He became like us. He became truly, fully human. And He did it willingly. Voluntarily. Without coercion or hesitation. Though He was truly, fully God, He willingly set aside the privileges of deity in order to give Himself for us. Jesus didn’t try to hold onto His privileges at all costs. He didn’t try to use His status for His own personal advantage. Unh-uh.

Instead, what did He do? In verse 7, it says that He “made Himself nothing, taking the very nature (form) of a servant (*doulos*, which literally means slave), being made in human likeness.” Like Prince Edward in Mark Twain’s story of *The Prince and the Pauper*, the son of England’s King Henry VIII, who temporarily exchanged his royal clothing for the garb of poverty and took on the life of a pauper, Jesus let go of all the glories and privileges of heaven in order to take on our flesh-and-blood life here on earth. Just as Edward in his disguise as a pauper did not cease to be a prince – and eventually king, so Jesus did not cease to be God when He made the incredible journey from heaven to Bethlehem. His identity may have been hidden. Not everyone recognized or believed in Him as the Son of God. But in the incarnation Jesus did not cease to be God. Not even for a second. Not in Mary’s womb. Not as a newborn in a manger. Not as a boy growing up in Nazareth. Not during the years of His public ministry. Not when He was arrested by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Not when He was put on trial. Not when He was on the cross, with spikes driven through His hands and feet. Or when His body lay in the tomb between Good Friday and Easter morning. And certainly not in His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven, and His exaltation as King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus did not lay aside His deity, though you might say He went “undercover” when He became like us in the incarnation.

What else did Jesus do? Not only did He “(make) Himself nothing” by becoming truly, fully human (2:7), verse 8 says that “He humbled Himself,” first by becoming a man, and then by enduring the humiliation, the excruciating pain and forsakenness of the cross. It was a humbling thing for the God of the universe to experience the limitations and infirmities and hardships of this life. When I say it was a humbling thing for God, don’t get the wrong idea. I don’t mean that God had some kind of problem with pride and needed a dose of humility. That is not it. Unlike many of us (or all of us), God has never had a problem with pride. And He never will. God willingly humbled Himself. He assumed a place of humility in order to fully identify with us in our humanness.

Frank Thielman describes the journey of Jesus this way. He says that Jesus went from the highest position imaginable (in heaven) to the lowest place and the worst kind of death imaginable in Roman society (death on a cross) as an expression of His incredible, incomparable, self-giving, self-emptying, self-sacrificing love for a world of lost sinners.

Because of His love for you and me, Jesus made this incredible journey from heaven to Bethlehem. Because of His love for you and me, He made the incredible journey from that stable in Bethlehem to a cross outside Jerusalem. Because of His incredible love for you and me, Jesus lived a selfless, obedient life and died a selfless, obedient death (*The Message*). What we celebrate at Christmas is the birth of the sinless Son of God in flesh and blood, who lived a sinless life as a man and willingly died to save sinners who are helpless to save ourselves.

Hall of Fame baseball pitcher Bob Feller died last week (December 15, 2010) at the age of 92. Known variously as “the Heater from Van Meter (Iowa),” “Rapid Robert” and “Bullet Bob,” because of the speed of his fastball, Feller made it to the major leagues with the Cleveland Indians when he was just 17. Bob Feller had a phenomenal career, even though he missed four seasons of baseball during World War II. He enlisted in the Navy on December 8, 1941, the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He was the first major league player to enlist in the military following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Fiercely patriotic, Feller volunteered for combat duty, and served as a gunner on the USS Alabama, shooting down planes in the Pacific. Because of his years spent in the Navy, his baseball career numbers are not as impressive as they would have been. Somebody asked him once if he regretted his wartime service. “No,” he said. “I’ve made many mistakes in my life. That wasn’t one of them.” It was a sacrifice he made without regret.

Like Bob Feller, Jesus made a sacrifice – in His case, the ultimate sacrifice of His life – without regret. Jesus did not regret making the incredible journey from heaven to earth, to Bethlehem, to Nazareth and the villages and towns of Galilee, and then to Jerusalem and Golgotha. He gave His life as a sacrifice to save us from our sins, to free us from the grip of sin and guilt and all the fears that haunt us. He did it without regret. And He did it for us. For you and me.

In his book *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* James Edwards tells this amazing true story of four mountain climbers, two Germans and two Italians, who attempted to climb the 6,000 foot near-vertical North Face in the Swiss Alps in 1957. The two Germans died in an avalanche on the mountain. The two Italians, exhausted and dying, were stuck on two narrow ledges a thousand feet below the summit. Even though rescue attempts in this area were forbidden because they were so dangerous, a group of Swiss climbers decided to undertake an effort to save the Italian climbers. From a helicopter, they lowered a man named Alfred Hellepart down from the summit of the North Face by means of a steel cable not even an inch thick. Here is how Hellepart described the rescue in his own words:

“As I was lowered down the summit ... my comrades on top grew further and further distant, until they disappeared from sight. At this moment I felt an indescribable aloneness. Then for the first time I peered down the abyss of the North Face. The terror of the sight robbed me of

breath I was a tiny human being dangling in space between heaven and hell. The sole relief from my terror was ... my mission to save the climber below.”

Hellepart was successful in his mission to save one of the climbers. The other climber died of exposure before he could be rescued.

It is not a perfect analogy, I suppose, but don't you see the heart of the gospel in this real-life drama of desperation and rescue? We were trapped, like the climbers on the North Face, with no way out, with no way to rescue ourselves. But God, in His great love for us, lowered Himself in the person of His Son into the abyss of our sin and brokenness and dysfunction, into the mess we've made of this world and of our own lives. In Jesus, God became “a tiny human being dangling between heaven and hell.”

Why in the world did Jesus do that? He did it to save the people who were trapped below. He did it to save people like you and me. He did it by going all the way to death on a cross. And He did it without regret. He did it out of love.

But notice this. After this incredible journey from heaven to Bethlehem, after His condescension which culminated in His death on the cross for us, comes the exaltation of Jesus in heaven to the place of highest honor in verses 9-11. The result of His exaltation is that every knee of every created being everywhere in all of creation will bow in recognition of His supremacy and authority over everything, and every tongue will acknowledge that *Jesus is Lord*, which will bring glory to God now and for all eternity. The exaltation of Jesus, as much as His condescension in the incarnation, is part of His incredible journey.

Believing the gospel, the good news, of Jesus' incredible journey; trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ for our salvation; receiving Him by faith as Savior and Lord of our lives; living every moment of every day as followers of the Lord Jesus; loving God with everything we have in every way we can, and loving each other the way Jesus Himself loved us; serving God and His purposes for our lives in this time and place in history; and becoming more like Jesus in the way we think, act and talk: All these things are part of the incredible journey of faith that God has planned for undeserving sinners like us on whom He chooses to lavish His grace.

Wherever you may be on this incredible journey, keep on keeping on. Don't get discouraged when the journey becomes difficult. “Difficult” is a part of life. Whether you find yourself in a difficult place or a comfortable place, God's grace is enough. It really is. In the midst of your journey, rejoice. Praise God for His presence with you and the power of His Spirit at work in you. Praise God that Jesus made the journey from heaven to Bethlehem at Christmas, and then to the cross for you.

If you have never begun the incredible journey of living as a follower of Christ, if you have never opened your heart in faith to receive Him as Savior and Lord of your life, I invite you to do so this evening. I invite you to do it right now. There is no better time than Christmas to have Christ born in your heart. Tell Him you are a sinner who needs a Savior. Tell Him you're sorry for your sins and want to be forgiven. Tell Him you're thankful that He made

the journey from heaven to Bethlehem and from Bethlehem to the cross. Tell Him you're thankful that He died for you. Ask Him to be your Savior and Lord, and to take up residence in your life. It will be for you the beginning of a truly incredible journey.

I love what Joseph Bayly wrote years ago. Some of you have heard it before. It is called *A Psalm for Christmas Eve*. I'll close with this.

Praise God for Christmas.
 Praise Him for the Incarnation
 For the Word made flesh.
 (Tonight) I will not sing
 Of shepherds watching flocks
 On frosty night or angel choristers.
 I will not sing of a stable bare in Bethlehem
 Or lowing oxen
 Wise men trailing a distant star
 With gold and frankincense and myrrh.
 Tonight I will sing praise to the Father
 Who stood on heaven's threshold
 And said farewell to His Son
 As He stepped across the stars
 To Bethlehem and Jerusalem.
 And I will sing praise to the infinite eternal Son
 Who became most finite
 A baby who would one day
 Be executed for my crimes.
 Praise Him in the heavens.
 Praise Him in the stable.
 Praise Him in my heart.

Of all the incredible journeys ever undertaken, this one is the most incredible. And the one that matters most. For all time and eternity.

Praise Him in the heavens. Praise Him in the stable. Praise Him in your heart. Lord, let it be so. Now and always. Amen.