

Journeying

Isaiah 55:1-3, 10-12

The theme for our Advent season is “Pilgrimage to Bethlehem.” And this week’s theme is “Journeying.” Today we will look at three journeys: 1) The journey of the Word of God into our lives and into the life of the world; 2) the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem; and 3) Our own sacred journey. We might better name this sermon: The Three Journeys

I

I hadn’t thought much recently about the journey of God’s Word into our lives and into the world until I read the words of Isaiah in today’s text. What is the Word of God? Far more than a black-leather-bound Bible with gold letters. Far more than the big floppy Bible some preachers wave as they preach. In the Iona worship book, after the reading of scripture the words come:

For the word of God in scripture

For the word of God within us

For the word of God among us

Thanks be to God

The Word of God is vaster even than that. The Word of God is more than words we read. It is the very speaking of God, the Speaking of God which brought the world into existence. Creation was the first word of God.

In *Genesis* God spoke the world into being: first, the light, then the day and night, the sun and the moon, then the earth and the sea, the green plants which give us food, and finally on the climactic sixth day God spoke human kind into existence: So God created humankind in God's own image, male and female God created them (Genesis 1:27). God not only spoke the world into being, someday God *sang* the world into being. God sang the world into being so we could hear the music of the spheres, the music of Creation everywhere.

John begins his gospel with the same theme:

In the beginning was the Speaking of God
and the Speaking of God was with God
and was God.

And then, the Word we had been waiting for all our lives: "And the Speaking of God became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

Creation was the first word of God, then God's Speaking began to spread throughout the earth. The Word came to indigenous people through nature and spirit. The Word traveled to China and was called the *Tao*. It traveled to India

and was called the *Dharma*. It traveled to Israel and became the *Torah*, and it came to us all in Jesus' flesh and was called the Gospel.

The Word of God also travels into our lives, through family, scripture and church, and as it does it brings life to us. In the first creed of the Hebrew people, the *Shema* we are called to listen for God's Word "Hear O Israel", then we are commanded to write the Word of God on our hearts, to teach the words of God diligently to our children, to post them on the doorposts of our houses and to talk about them as we go.

The rabbis asked this question of this verse: Why did God place the Word *on* our hearts, rather than *in* our hearts? Their answer, "God placed the Word on our hearts, then when the heart breaks the words fall in." That's how it works. The heart can break with pain and sorrow yes, but also with love and beauty! The Word of God is placed on the surface on our hearts, then it tumbles in.

Isaiah invites us to take the Word of God into our mouths like bread and wine, like the most sumptuous feast. And it's free! "Come ye that have no money, come buy and eat!" Why, the prophet asks, do you spend money for that which is not bread? Come to the feast of God's Word. And it's on the house.

The prophet also gives us the glorious message that the Word of God which God sends out into the world will not fail. As God sends the rain and snow to

water the earth so that it bears fruit, so God's world goes out and doesn't return empty. It accomplishes the purposes for which God sent it into the world.

In Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, a baritone sings a solo called "The Word of the Lord."

For the Word created mud and got it going,

It filled our empty brains with blood

and set it flowing

And for several million years

It's endured all our forums and fine ideas.

Then the refrain

No, you cannot imprison the Word of the Lord....

You cannot scuttle the Word of the Lord,

You cannot abolish the Word of the Lord.

In 1536 William Tyndale was burned at the stake for translating the Bible into English. He wanted to free the Bible from the control of the church and its clergy. He wanted a Bible a common ploughboy could read. The Bible was imprisoned in 8th century Latin only the learned could read. As he was dying in the flames he prayed, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." And guess what?

Soon other English translations began to appear, and in 1610 came the King James Version of the Bible, authorized by the King himself!

There have been other ways of controlling and confining God's Word. One, already mentioned was confining God's Word to the words of the Bible. Here are some more. The slave owners gave their slaves a highly edited Bible called the *Slave Bible*. It had a scant 232 verses. It took out all the passages that might lead the slaves to revolt and seek God-given freedom, like the Exodus, and it kept in all the passages that taught them to be subservient.

Another way of controlling and imprisoning the Word of God: for centuries only men were authorized to be interpreters and preachers of the Word of God. But look, God's word cannot be controlled. Our day is bringing women scholars and preachers giving us new eyes to see God's Word.

We cannot abolish the Word of the Lord. "The body they may kill; God's word abideth still!" May the Word of God make its journey in our hearts today.

II

Now let's move to the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. It was a long demanding three-day journey by foot from Nazareth to Bethlehem. If couldn't have been an easy journey for Mary, now full with child. Paintings have

pictured Mary on a donkey, Joseph walking by her side, but it must have been difficult whether walking or riding.

But before that journey was the *nine-month journey of pregnancy*, and that too fraught with danger and difficulty. Joseph's decision to protect mother and child, the last-minute plans to marry, her growing belly, the growing gossip of the villagers. The morning sickness, or all-day sickness, Mary as all mothers hanging over the toilet for the sake of the child, the swollen feet, the anxiety for the health of the child. She needed the words of the angel "Do not be afraid" all the days of the pregnancy. And every birth of every child has had dangers for the mother and the child. As Chesterton said, "But for the courage of mothers, none of us would be born.

One saving grace was her friendship with her older cousin Elizabeth, someone she could talk with when she couldn't talk with anyone else. One hopes Joseph had a friend as well.

On our journey through life no one can make it all alone, though we some days try.

Mary and Joseph made it to Bethlehem and came to an inn; another journey was about to begin.

Now let's move to our own journey, our spiritual journey toward God, with God, into God with Jesus as our guide. It is our own sacred journey toward our true self and toward God. As we arrive at one, we arrive at the other.

Part of this journey is listening to your life as God speaks into your life, not just with words but with the events of your life. Frederick Buechner says that if he were to say in a few sentences what he has been trying to say through all his writing as a novelist and preacher it would be this:

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness—touch, taste, smell you way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.¹

To be sure, our sacred journey is not always an easy one, as that of Mary and Joseph. There will be obstacles, we will lose our way, but the words of *Amazing Grace* are truth for me:

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come,
but grace hath led me safe thus far
and grace will lead me home.

Sometimes we don't know we've taken the wrong path for awhile. I remember hiking in the mountains one day and discovering that I had lost my way. I frantically searched for the place where I had left the path. I did before too long, but I still remember the fear of the moment.

We may be lost, but God like the shepherd of Jesus' parable will come get us and carry us home.

Jayber Crow, the main character in a Wendell Berry novel says, "...This feeling came over me that I had strayed back onto the right path of my life."² When this happens, we experience grace.

We may feel we're just wandering in life, but a Tolkien character says to us this wisdom:

All that is gold does not glitter

Not all those who wander are lost.

As we listen to our lives we will look back and see the presence of God with us all along. Times you suddenly found the right path again. Moments of truth and beauty and love. Times you were saved from injury or illness or death. Times when by God's grace sin became the occasion of grace, times when you were loved back to life. Deep sea divers tell of descending into the depths of the sea and reaching a point where light no longer penetrates the darkness of the water.

They grow anxious. But then their eyes adjust and they begin to pick up what one called “the Luminous quality of the darkness.” No matter how deep we go, there is in the darkness the light of God. Wherever our sacred journeys take us, grace is by our side. There are holy moments and holy places in our lives, and we revisit them in our minds and sometimes travel back there.

On the sacred journey we are traveling from God to God. In T.S. Eliot’s poem “Little Gidding” he wrote:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.³

This is our journey, and this is where it will end. God is our warm hearth, the welcoming arms, our first and last home. In this life God sends us all out on a journey, and God will bring us home.

1. Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Washington, D.C., 2000),86.
2. Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then* (San Francisco, Harper&Row,1983), 87.
3. T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”, *Four Quartets* (N.Y.: A Harvest Book. Harcourt, Inc., 1943),59.