

December 29, 2019

"The Journey"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Philippians 1:3-11

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My sister-in-law, Marian, who many of you have met, is heavily into genealogy. She's traced her and John's family back to the early 1700's in Italy, which is no small feat, given the fact that the Italians are not famous for their administrative skills. Cooking, yes. Wine making, yes. Record keeping in a small town in Southern Italy, no! Marian also traced my family back to the early 1800's in Ireland.

Surprisingly, the record keeping was in very good shape. But there was nothing pertaining to a good Chianti. Anyway, Marian and I got to talking about the courage it must have taken for our respective families, and families like ours, to leave their native lands back then and travel to America. Selling your belongings, traveling overland to a seaport, gaining passage across the ocean, landing somewhere on the East Coast, and then, as in the case of my ancestors, traveling on to Indiana. Sometimes the trips the immigrants had to make took up to six or seven months. I'm sure it was difficult and challenging, as well as terrifying at times. And yet today, we can make that very same trip, literally in just six or seven hours. And here's another thing – a couple of hundred years ago, it took months to get a letter across the country, and you hoped it got there. Now, with a simple click of the mouse, an email is instantaneously delivered, anywhere in the world. Obviously, the world is shrinking. In some ways that's comforting, and in some ways, it's also terrifying, don't you think? I mean, what's next?

Now you may be wondering, with all the Christmas music we're singing and hearing today, and the fact we're still in the season of celebration and good cheer, where am I going with all this? What does time and distance have to do with Christmas? Well, I think sometimes in the midst of all of the celebration, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that Christ was born and came to this earth for a specific purpose. As the angel said, "Unto you is born this day, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." And the purpose Jesus came for, as our Savior, would be fulfilled just a short journey, a short distance away. The distance between Bethlehem, where Christ was born, and Jerusalem, Calvary, where Christ died. Now the distance between the two is only a mere five geographical miles. But in our minds we tend to make them much, much further apart. Because consider, in Bethlehem, we hear angels sing of great joy and peace on earth. But in Jerusalem we hear crowds shouting for crucifixion, for murder. In Bethlehem, there is a manger in which lies a new life. In Jerusalem, there stands a cross on which hangs a dying man. In Bethlehem, we bow before the newborn King because of what his birth represents. Hope, and joy, and peace, and love. But in Jerusalem, we kneel before a cross, because of what his death represents.

Sacrifice, atonement, forgiveness, salvation. Yes, Jesus' birth and death seems so diametrically the opposite, so distant from one another. So what are we to make of that five mile distance, that journey between Bethlehem and Jerusalem?

Well, for Jesus, that distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem was a journey of teaching, of healing, of performing miracles. It was a journey of breaking down barriers, of challenging the status quo, of bringing acceptance, mercy, understanding to all. It was a journey to save people from sin and wrongdoing and show them a new way, and assure them of their place in heaven. Yes, this journey was indeed a journey of hope, joy, peace and love. And, it was also a journey of sacrifice, atonement, forgiveness and salvation. It was a journey of birth, death and re-birth, resurrection. You see, what I'm saying is that Christmas and Calvary are so closely connected that we really can't separate them without destroying the one great mystery that they both are meant to accomplish and celebrate. And that is that God took on our very own nature, that of a human being, so that we might take on God's very own nature. Let me say that again - we cannot separate Christmas and Calvary, because they are both meant to accomplish and celebrate the same thing. That which C.S. Lewis said, "The Son of God became a man, to enable men to become sons of God," daughters of God, children of God. Jesus entered our time and space in order to shrink the distance between heaven and earth. To bring us closer to God.

And with that in mind - that we really cannot separate Christmas from Calvary, then what does that five mile journey from Bethlehem and Jerusalem mean for you and me? Well, I would suggest it is a journey that we, as Christian disciples must make. On Wednesday of this week, we will welcome in a new year. And this is often a time we reflect on and examine our lives. As the Greek philosopher Socrates once said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Which I believe to be true. And yet our Christianity pushes us even further. The Gospel says that the un-growing life is not worth living. We ought to indeed examine our lives, to see where we fall short and to anticipate our potential, but examination isn't enough. After seeing where we are, we need to correct, improve, and grow. That's what true discipleship demands. Heaven made us to be growing creatures, and if we abdicate that calling, we miss the very purpose of our being. We are born not to be perpetual infants, but to reach holy maturity.¹ As Christians, we are called to make the journey from manger to the cross. Just as Jesus did. That's what our Scripture reading was all about today. "I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. And I pray that your love may overflow

¹ On Being A Finished Product, J. Ellsworth Kalas

more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. So that you may live pure and blameless lives.”

Yes, we are all on a journey through life. And it’s up to each one of us to make ourselves move forward toward deeper discipleship, toward holy maturity. As the Apostle Peter wrote, “Make every effort to add to your faith, goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, godliness. The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Over the next few months you will hear more about discipleship – what it means and how you as an individual, and we as a church can grow together. But for now, it’s still Christmas! So let me go back to St. Luke's gospel and a passage that reflects the joy and meaning of the season. *In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them do not be afraid, for... "I am bringing you good news of great joy."* And so, go ahead, and continue to party and celebrate and be filled with joy. For Jesus, himself thoroughly enjoyed parties and celebrations. *and the angel said, "For unto you is born a Savior."* Know that you are saved – set free from sin, free from the past, from guilt, from regret, from old ways. You are made new. *And the angel said, "Peace on earth, good will toward all"*. Remember, Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” And you are called to be a peacemaker. One word, one gesture, one action at a time.

Yes, our time here on earth is short – a relatively short journey of life. But the kingdom of God to where we are headed – well that is eternal - glorious, imperishable, everlasting.