

Christmas II B

St. Stephen's, Belvedere

January 4, 2015

Unfinished Pilgrims

Happy New Year to you!

The lovely Madonna and Child image on the front of the worship bulletin is iconic of what we have been celebrating in our common prayer over the past fortnight. Just two weeks ago today the 3 ponies and 2 goats and a flock of chickens came processing down the aisle with a throng of shepherds, angels and kings to a crèche with Joseph, Mary and the astonishingly composed (at least at a distance) baby Jesus. (Not just the barnyard animals were alive—the baby Jesus was alive!)

We have been singing the carols of the birth of the Christ child, filled with the profound theology of our faith—how “Long lay the world in sin and error pining, ‘Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth.”

At our house in Mill Valley, as we opened our gifts on Christmas morning, there was one gift that I received that stirred long thoughts and deep feelings. It was a gift from my brother in Connecticut with whom I had helped clean out my mother's attic earlier last year. As I removed the red printed wrapping paper from the rectangular frame, I turned it over to see what the picture was. I was completely undone by what I saw. I sat silently for the longest moment just staring at it. Then I found myself weeping. Our daughter Ava came over and put her arm around me.

The framed gift was an old black and white photograph that I had never seen before, of our old one-room beach house and in front of it, my mother with an 18-month old tow-headed boy that was me.

Later my wife Anita asked me, “Richard, what was that about?”

“The beginning of the journey,” I replied. “The journey that I am on-- that began there and has led to here.”

We each have had a beginning point from which our life has sprung. The journey you and I are on can be traced back to an origin of when and how it began.

In a sense this is what we have been doing in the life of Jesus, tracing it back from the cross and resurrection, through the preaching and proclamation and healing, to its very human origin in a manger in Bethlehem, to a mother whose womb shaped his body and whose love shaped his soul.

So these last two weeks we have been celebrating the birth and infancy of Jesus. Indeed, he is the reason for the season. Next week, the Sunday after the Epiphany, the gospel will be of the baptism of the adult Jesus in the river Jordan when he was approximately thirty years of age.

But what happened in the 29 years in between? Of three decades of Jesus' life between Bethlehem and his baptism in the River Jordan, the four gospels of the New Testament are silent—EXCEPT for this one glimpse from the gospel of Luke, a story that takes place when the boy Jesus is twelve years old.

The setting for the story is Joseph and Mary's customary annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the spring rite of Passover there. It was a long walk. Have you ever walked 25 miles at one stretch? That is almost but not quite a 26.2 miles marathon. How about walking 25 miles a day for three days straight? The annual pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem was a distance of approximately 75 miles. It took 3 days to get there, and three days to return home. I guess they really wanted to go there!

Perhaps you yourself have at some time made a pilgrimage, whether sacred or secular. Perhaps you've walked the Camino de Santiago, or traveled to Jerusalem and Galilee, or a 50<sup>th</sup> high school reunion.

The current film playing in theatres called "Wild" is about a pilgrimage of sorts. It depicts the strenuous hike that a distressed woman in her twenties chooses to take on the 2,663 mile long Pacific Coast Trail, from Mexico to Canada. The dangerous, demanding ordeal of this journey is undertaken as a way to strip herself down to find what is authentic and essential in her life, and to find healing from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that she has largely forged for herself, but much of which is just the trials of our common living and dying on earth.

Like walking the labyrinth, travel on a pilgrimage is inward as well as outward. A pilgrimage is not just about arriving at a destination; it is about how one arrive at a destination—and becoming a changed person.

So the three days out and three days back of Joseph and Mary's annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem made with friends, neighbors and relations was undoubtedly a part of the meaning for them of what it meant to observe Passover. This annual rite was marked with their tribe which was centered in Jerusalem. It was the whole experience.

Furthermore, this incident of the adolescent Jesus in the temple takes place, we are told, when he was twelve years old—which is about the right age for good Jewish boy to spend extra time with the rabbis--as you know if you have ever been to bar mitzvah. And it is also the stage of life when most of us begin to forge our own way in life. We started exploring and experimenting, to try to find out who we ourselves are, distinct from our parents and our family of origin.

The gospel story registers Jesus' mother's pique at his having set himself apart from them: "Child, why have you treated us like this?," she scolds. "Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety!"

WHERE they found the boy is in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and questioning as they debate the fundamentals of faith.

"Why were you searching for me?," the boy responds. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" --Here is the double entendre of Joseph as Jesus' earthly father, and the heavenly Father who the adult Jesus would teach us to address as "Abba," "Daddy," as in "Our father who art in heaven."

Perhaps it is because this Sunday gospel comes to us right between the accounts of the infant Jesus in the manger and of the advent of his public ministry following his baptism in the river Jordan, and

Is read by us right at the turning of the new year when reflection upon what is past and what lies ahead is quite natural, that I see this story as depicting the awakening of Jesus personal vocation.

If you trace back along the silver thread of your own life, you will undoubtedly recognize with hindsight some experiences or moments which presaged the person you would become—for better or for ill.

This cameo we are given today of the boy Jesus in the temple among the teachers captures such a pregnant moment for him. Indeed, scripture testifies that his mother wondered that pondering familiar to all parents, “What will this child become?”

New Years-- the end of the old year and beginning of the new-- comes as an annual reminder that we are not finished yet. We can still make new decisions, new choices to more faithfully live out the authentic person that God has given us birth to become.

Indeed all the past choices of our life that have shaped who we are now, are irrelevant. All that matters are the choices that we make NOW, going forward. We can choose afresh: What sort of person will we yet become—Kind? Bitter? Faithful? Negligent?

This first Sunday of the New Year is an opportune time for us to take stock of what our life is about, of what is most important to us, of what inner promptings may be leading us to undertake a task that beckons. Identity, my revered theology professor never tired of reminding us, is not just an inner process like peeling an onion, but an outer process of listening and discerning that there is this that needs doing in the world and I am called to do it.

This is why, this time each year, I like to close out the celebration of Christmas with the poignant reminder of San Francisco civil rights leader, poet and pastor Howard Thurman, who prompts us remember that....

When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the Kings and Princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
The work of Christmas begins.  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry  
To release the prisoner,  
To teach the nations,  
To bring Christ to all,  
To make music in the heart.

YOUR pilgrimage (and mine) continues.

--Enshallah. --“If God wills it.”

Thanks be to God!