

Wandering With Purpose

Matthew 2:13-21

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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More than any other time of year, Christmas releases a mysterious yearning to be permanently anchored to something tangible. This “tangible something” might be a place or a group of people or a combination of the two. Perhaps that explains the lasting popularity of Bing Crosby’s song, “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” Sure, it’s a sentimental song but it still strikes a deep chord expressing the universal desire to be socially and spiritually grounded in something greater than ourselves.

This year it was particularly important for me to go home to celebrate with my brother and sisters our last Christmas together in the home we grow up in. It was a bittersweet time to grieve our losses and recommit ourselves to the unspoken need to stick together as we face the future.

Ideally a home isn’t just a house, it’s a time capsule filled with memories of experiences good and not so good that formed our personalities and shaped our values. “Home is where the heart is,” rings true, but I found myself wondering, does that old expression really go far enough? Maybe a better way of saying it would be, “Home is where God is.”

You may be far from home and the people you love but wherever situation you find yourself in, knowing God is with you makes all difference.

In the Christmas stories found in the gospels, Mary and Joseph were on a desperate journey taking them far from home. Instead of staying in Nazareth for the birth of their child, they took seriously the prophecies about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem. Unfortunately for them, even after Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem their wanderings continued. From there, the holy family was forced on the road again not to Nazareth but instead to Egypt to escape Herod’s wrath until it was finally safe to go home.

Thirty years later, Jesus made the decision to leave his home and family behind to begin wandering the hills and valleys of the Promised Land. In accordance to his Father’s will, Jesus wandered with a purpose: to heal the sick, comfort the distressed and proclaim the good news, “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” Homeless by choice, Jesus slept under the stars unless invited to be the guest of friends and followers.

Remember his lament? “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

Jesus’ wanderings reflected the endless wanderings endured by the Jews before and after him. Throughout their long history, the Jews survived multiple wanderings far from home. These endless journeys started with their centuries of bondage in Egypt, followed up by years of

wandering in the wilderness and later in Babylon, setting the stage for their longest wanderings to date.

In 70 A.D. the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, uprooted the Jews and dispersed them throughout the known world. For the next 2000 years, the Jews continue to wander and in the meantime suffered persecution, miraculously surviving by the grace of God.

Only after the holocaust shamed the people of the world were the Jews finally permitted return to the Promised Land, until the next time they are forced once again to wander far from home.

It's amazing to realize throughout their history the Jews courageously maintained their identity by separating themselves from the Gentiles. It sounds like they wanted to be hermits until you realize the Hebrew word for separate is holy.

The Jews were called by God to be separated from the world and be a light to all the nations of the earth. For that reason, Pope John Paul once addressed the Jews as our older brothers and sisters.

On this first day of the new year, let's remember our promise to to be God's light in the world. Our primary role model is Jesus but we can also look to the Jews, faced with adversity and worse, who refused to surrender their identity as God's people and kept the faith alive.

Like the Holy Family wandering from Nazareth to Bethlehem to Egypt Jesus and the faithful remnant of Jews wandering the earth over the centuries, as well as Jesus who had no place to lay his head, learn this hard lesson: wherever you find yourself, home is where God is waiting for us.

Of course wandering isn't fun but it's necessary for the completion of our humanity. If we choose to stay home, keeping ourselves safe and sound, how can we ever discover our purpose in life? Only stepping out from our comfort zones and following Christ into the wilderness can we learn how to trust God and live by faith, one day at a time.

This morning may find you spiritually hung over. Especially at the tail end of all of the holidays you may feel alone, frustrated and vulnerable. If that's the case, you are especially invited to be Christ's guest at his table to taste and see that the Lord is good.

Whenever Jesus came upon people mired in sin or overwhelmed by life, he never put extra burdens on them. Instead, he gave them a new sense of purpose. That doesn't mean their wanderings became a stroll in the park. The journey was still hard but instead of sapping them of energy, they were filled with God's grace, just enough for the day, all that anyone needs.

Remember the story of manna from Heaven? Every morning the Jews were instructed to go out looking for that bread from heaven and taking just enough for the day, no more, no less. By setting it up this way, God taught them how to live one day at a time, trusting God would provide their needs and tomorrow was another day.

That promise remains operative today. Jesus transforms your meaningless wanderings into a purposeful march into the future. He promises to make his home in you. Where ever you go, you carry Christ with you. That's what it means to be a Christian. You are one who carries Christ where ever you go.

Along the way you learn new things about yourself as the Holy Spirit enlightens and empowers you to bring the Christ within you to people and situations in need of redemption. You are transformed into one of those essential lights that overcomes the darkness. With every step you take, you become even more confident in the promise that when God is with you all things are possible.

You also learn a secret meant for anybody who wants to believe it. God not only shows you the way, the way is made passable. If someone shows up to interrupt your wanderings, God, will protect you.

In his commentary on Matthew's Gospel, William Barclay includes a legend about the Holy Family fleeing for their lives to Egypt. One cold night, Joseph and Mary sought refuge in a cave. After they entered the cave a family of spiders begin spinning a web across the cave's entrance that was soon covered with frost.

Later that night, a detachment of Herod's soldiers sent out to seek and kill the child passed the cave. The officer in charge noticed the spider's web covered with frost. When one of his soldiers dismounted, the captain said, "Don't waste your time. That web has been there for a long time. No one's in that cave now, let's move on."

Some say this legend is the basis for putting tinsel on our Christmas trees. The glimmering tinsel stands for the spider's web white with frost, keeping the holy family from harms way.

Of course it's only a legend but like all legends the truth behind it is powerful. When you face adversity as you wander through life for Christ, God weaves around you a web of grace.

God's grace surrounds us especially when we gather around his son's table. Taste his grace as you eat the bread, drink the wine and claim your identity as one those call to wander for Christ and his kingdom through this life into the next.