

Journeying in Joy

Luke 1:46b-55

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be together this morning.

Up on the screen, there's an image of a very famous walking path called the El Camino de Santiago. Translated into English, it's called "The Way of St. James." The hike begins at Saint Jean Pied de Port, France, and travels 500 miles through four of Spain's 15 regions, ending at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia. There's a whole series of different routes or portions of the route that can be taken. The Camino de Santiago attracts pilgrims from all over the world; nearly 350,000 Compostela pilgrim certificates were issued in 2019 alone (compared to just over 1200 in 1985), which will give you some idea of how popular it's become in recent years. What is unique about this hiking route is that over the centuries it has come to be seen as a Spiritual Pilgrimage, of sorts for people from Christian Traditions. Many people choose to walk some or all of the trail as a spiritual exercise- seeing the churches, staying at monasteries, seeing God in Creation, meeting fellow pilgrims (as they are called), and opening themselves up to what the Holy Spirit might want to show them through the experience. The Camino de Santiago trails are very well marked with scallop shells and

Camino markings painted everywhere (trees, roads, walls...). All you have to do is simply follow the yellow arrows and they'll guide you to Santiago de Compostela! My friend, Angelle, walked the Camino last spring and her photos and stories are incredible. I confessed to Taylor that when I'm eligible for my first pastoral sabbatical, I want to take our whole family and do the Camino. He said, "That's a lot of walking."

One of the things that I think is really unique about the Camino is that the point is not to get to the end, the Cathedral of St. John, you could just fly to the closest airport, drive to the city and see the church. The point of the Camino is that you do the walk, the point is it to walk paths, meet the people, follow the markings, pay attention. Pilgrims are issued passports to have stamped along the walk, and are issued a certificate of completion upon arriving at the Cathedral. The journey is the whole point, not the destination. The journey on the Camino is the purpose of the Camino.

The idea of the Camino provides a really beautiful and poignant metaphor for our faith. It's about the journey, it's about walking with Jesus everyday, not about the the final destination. This idea is somewhat counter intuitive to the faith tradition that I grew up in that placed strong emphasis on "accepting Jesus, so that I could go to Heaven someday." Both ideas, accepting Jesus and going to heaven are these sort of isolated moments in time, and there was very little talk about what happened in the middle. I remember when I was in grade 10 or so, I had this revelation that Christianity wasn't about the destination, it was about the journey to get there. I told my youth pastor about what I thought was a stroke of deep spiritual insight. He was not impressed, the point,

he said, was very much about the destination.

The Carmelite word for this 3rd week of Advent is journeying. Our first Sunday was waiting, last Sunday was accepting and today is journeying. Oftentimes, Advent is seen as simply the waiting for Christmas, but for this morning, I'd like us to think of Advent as a journey. That the 'getting" to Christmas is the bigger deal, rather than Christmas itself.

We do need to recognize that every journey has a beginning. This isn't something to downplay or make into too big of a deal. Beginnings are the start of a journey. In our scripture for this morning, Ed read what is known as The Magnificat, or Mary's Song. This is the song of praise and prophecy that Mary offers after receiving the news from the Angel Gabriel that she will give birth to the savior. Mary has consented to this calling. She then goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with the wee babe who will grow up to be John the Baptist. The baby in Elizabeth's womb "leaps for joy" (which sounds wildly uncomfortable to me) and it's this moment of revelation for Mary -"This is really happening!" That she sings this beautiful song.

Mary is obviously a key character in the Nativity. She is the mother of Jesus. She is a prophetess of sorts, singing this song. But really, the nativity is only the beginning of Mary's story. It's sort of this moment in time of transformation, of being set on a new life path, but it's a path that she's going to continue journeying along. Raising a child. Learning the ways that her firstborn will be "about his fathers business' '. Becoming her son's disciple. Watching her boy die on the cross, and be raised from the dead. As a

parent, I think, “Can you imagine!?! Your son coming back to life!” Mary is on a journey, and if we stop thinking of her as part of the story once the nativity ends, then we’re missing something. I remember when I was in the midst of my long labor with Junia, I expressed to one of my midwives that this was too hard. She told me I could do it, and with a gleam in her eye said that then I will raise this child, and that’s the really hard part. She had 4 children. It wasn’t really what I wanted to hear at that moment, that this would only get harder, but I realize now that she was trying to tell me, Emily, this is just the start of something. This is the first step on a journey. And it did get much harder, but it also became so, so good and joyous.

So, let’s talk about this metaphor of journey, whether we mean at Advent, in the roles we play in our lives, and in our faith. What does look for us, as people of faith, to find Joy in the Journey of walking with Jesus? What changes in perspective can help us along the way? How can we find joy not only in the idea of the destination, but in the journey itself?

First, we can center ourselves in the philosophy of the Camino. The destination isn’t necessarily the point, it’s about what happens along the walk. If we shift our perspective from, “Are we there yet?” to what we’re seeing out the window, what interesting things we might notice, what words from the Lord we might hear. If we adopt a posture of slowing down, of noticing, of paying attention as we walk through our faith journey. Who knows what we may notice?

As someone who takes frequent LONG road trip to Minnesota, we're always hustling to get there. Quick washroom break and back in the car! Pack a lunch so we don't have to stop! Pay at the pump! So, when we get to take a trip that's shorter, I just love it so much. An interesting lookout point on the side of the road? Let's stop! Let's linger over lunch at an actual restaurant. Let's stop and stretch. There is so much good in taking things a little slower, in the act of sacred curiosity. We if aim to see our faith as a journey, rather than a quick trip, we can open ourselves up to that.

Secondly, on a journey, it's often about who you meet. My friend, Angelle, the one who walked last Spring met all sorts of interesting people. Some of them were fellow Pilgrims, some were just locals in the town who offered her directions, or told her about a place to grab a bite to eat, or even just offered a smile and wave. She wrote, " One of the loveliest parts of the Camino is the people that are met along the way. This was taken last night at the Albergue we stayed at, nicknamed "The Nest". I sat beside a family of three mormons (mom and her two kids) from Lethbridge. On the other side was an older lady from Devon. I listened to their reasons for coming on the Camino and their reasons are as varied as the people sitting all along down the table. The room was loud, with people from all other the (mostly) northern hemisphere, enjoying one another's company."

When I think about my own journey with Jesus, and I would imagine that the same may be true for some of you, I think of all the incredible, interesting people that I have met because they are also on a journey with Jesus. My friends from college. My fellow

church members. Mentors, friends, hilarious teenagers and kids. Marg, I think of the women you met when you stationed with MCC in the states. Roger, the indigenous neighbors you've met through your various roles. What a gift it is to be in such varied, beautiful community of Christ followers. We can all probably think of places and spaces where that's true for us.

I recall, my friend Janna from college, spent a year in South Korea teaching English after she finished college. Janna was a pastors kid and had very much grown up in the church and had a really good experience of church life, but she was always the pastors kid, always surrounded by Christians. Then she moved to Korea where Christianity was not the dominate faith tradition. And she told about when she'd happen to meet another Christian, out in the wild, she would get so excited. Someone else who followed Jesus! Someone who understood! There was a connection, a mutuality with this person. Janna had received the gift of being accompanied in her faith all her life, but moving to Korea showed her what a gift all those fellow travelers really were.

Thirdly, a journey can be a place of transformation. A journey can be a place of transformation.

One of the most interesting stories in the Old Testament regarding the nation of Israel is about how God lead the people out of slavery of Egypt and promised them a new land, a new home, a place flowing with milk and honey. And on the journey towards the promised land, things got dicey. The people disobeyed God, made idols and just

generally pushed God away. Because of that, the relatively straightforward trip to the promised Land was a 40 year journey through the wilderness, before they could arrive at their destination.

Betty Pries, one of the speakers at the MCC Alberta Peace Conference that I attended in November, said something that I hadn't realized before. She said, that in scripture, when you see the word Wilderness appear, imagine a little flag pops up. On that flag, it says, "Transformation is about to happen." Over and over again in the Bible, times in the Wilderness mark some sort of significant transformation. The journey through the wilderness, as hard as it is, is a place of transformation. These are not spaces of punishment, as much as it feels that way, wilderness journeys are places of refinement, places of transformation, places of resurrection. When I look back on my own faith journey, and truly, I can only see it hindsight, the seasons that felt the hardest in my faith are the season where the most good, holy change happened in me.

Lastly, and this one maybe feels a little obvious, but journeys are meant to take a long time! When someone says, "Oh, I went on a trip!", you say, "Oh fun! Where did you go?". When someone says, "I've been on a journey!" you say, "Oh wow, tell me more, how long has it been?" A journey can't be rushed, a journey isn't supposed to all be tidied up quickly, a journey is meant to take time. In a culture that values efficiency and productivity, the ability to recognize that life with Jesus and with community is a journey is deeply counter-cultural. We need to frame what's happening in our lives and in the life of this church as a journey, rather than problems to be solved or rough edges that need

to be quickly sanded away. This also encourages grace for ourselves and others because God is not done with us. Angelle, my friend who walked the Camino, talked about how there was no point in trying to go faster, or make up for “lost time”. She had to accept the limitations of her body. There were only so many kilometers that she could walk each day. Each day brought new pains, and new mercies. Some days, the path was almost all uphill, some days it went down in the valley. It took time. Which was the whole point.

Friends, as we journey towards Christmas, through this Advent season, there is joy to be found. Maybe we’re at the beginning of something new, like Mary was. Maybe you’re deeply grateful for the people you’ve met along the way, the people who are your traveling companions now. Maybe you’re in the wilderness, and so, so tired of being there, awaiting the transformation that is happening. Maybe you need to be reminded that journeys take a long time, sometimes your whole life, and that’s okay. Regardless of where you are on the journey, let’s take heart, knowing that we serve a Saviour who has promised to walk with us each and every day of this journey. Amen.