

The Great Journey

Second Sunday after Christmas – Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

preached at St. Paul's, Henderson, January 3, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

With J.D. and Kyle with us for the holidays, I got to remembering the summer between my second and third year in seminary, when the boys and I embarked on what you have heard me call, “The Great Journey.” The boys and I had practiced setting up the tent, and had it down to a matter of just a few minutes to make or break camp. I gave the guys the shortest haircut they had ever had, we packed our gear into every available inch of our 1990 Dodge Spirit, and we were off!

We started the journey from our apartment in Alexandria, Virginia, went up through Maryland, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, to the western edge of Ohio, where we were able to visit my mother’s mother, the boy’s great-grandmother. I know for a fact that she didn’t recognize me, because she kept calling me by one of my uncles’ name, and she had no reason to *know* the boys except to comment that they *looked* like Furlongs. It was the last time any of us saw her. At the farm home where Grandma was being cared for, we also saw a tree growing forty feet straight up the inside of a silo and only branching after it had reached that height. I suspect I will never see anything like that again, either.

We then continued on to visit my folks in northern Indiana. The visit included a side trip to the giant sand dunes on the south shore of Lake Michigan with some of the boys’ cousins, especially then-fourteen-year-old Adam who, we all discovered, was obsessed with the fact that he had grown hair under only *one* of his arms.

We hit the road again through Illinois, into Wisconsin where we spent a day swimming and floating and laughing at a *huge* water park before camping at Lake City, Minnesota. At Lake City, the upper Mississippi River spreads out so that it looks more like a lake – hence the name of the place. Some years later, my friend John Bartholomew, my predecessor at St. Mark’s Pro-Cathedral in Nebraska, announced shortly after he lost his wife Elinor that he was moving to Lake City. “Now, Rich,” he said, “you probably think I’m *crazy* to move my entire life for a view!” I was able to tell him I had seen that view and understood perfectly well.

Heading westward, we stopped at the incredible Wall Drug Store (which I’ve told you about before), saw buffaloes in the Badlands, the granite faces of Mount Rushmore, and the natural wonders of Devil’s Tower and Yellowstone before setting up camp overlooking the Grand Tetons. We cooked our hotdogs quickly that evening as we watched a storm literally roll over those mighty peaks in the distance. By the time we finished the last bite and jumped into our little tent, the pelting rain and the lightening and the mountain-echoed thunder was on top of us. When the worst had gone and stormy day had turned to stormy night, we huddled tightly together and laughed inside our cloth-thin shelter, as another family fought against the wind and rain to erect their borrowed tent in the space next to ours. (I think I’ve told you *that* story before as well.)

After a stop to worship in a town named Moose, and gaze at the mirror-calm surface of a lake named Jenny, it was on to a hot spring just west of Twin Falls, Idaho. We spent the morning fishing for trout in a pay pond. Technically, the trout we caught cost about six dollars a piece, but they were as delicious at the end of a boy’s line as they were later in our mouths. By that afternoon, the weather had taken an extremely warm turn, and the last thing any of us wanted to do was sit around our ninety-five degree tent, or swim in the *hundred* and five degree waters of the hot spring. So we drove something like forty miles to find an air-conditioned theater, where I watched *The Lion King* for the first time, with my two boys, until the sun had gone down.

We kept going west until we couldn’t go that way anymore, reaching the Pacific somewhere in Oregon. We pitched our tent a hundred yards from the high-tide mark, and set

about discovering the wonders of creation to be found in the little pools left behind by the tide. I have a photo someplace of the boys running back laughing from an outcropping, an ocean wave crashing behind them, a picture that Jenny says would have never happened, if *she* had been there to tell us we were too close. That night the wind blew off the ocean with such force that we were sure that the only thing keeping us on the ground was our own weight within the tent.

Yachats to Stockton was the longest single day of driving on the journey: the rugged coast; the giant trees; the twists and turns of the road climbing higher and higher into the Sierra Nevada. Then, back down again toward Death Valley and a night barely sheltered from a sandstorm in a spot of a town called Needles at the gateway to my childhood stomping grounds. Arizona is often called, “The Grand Canyon State,” and with thousands and millions of others, we took our turn to look at the biggest hole in the ground on the continent. It was beautiful, and awesome.

Finally looking eastward, we shopped for Indian souvenirs, explored Meteor Crater where some celestial body made earthfall, lodged in a rustic log cabin (at a KOA), visited: friends in Oklahoma, another hot springs in Arkansas, and grandparents in Tennessee. After thirty days, 7,500 miles, and a couple-thousand-dollar addition to our credit cards, we were home again to share the story with Jenny.

Ah, yes, you are once again asking your self – because you are each *much* too polite to ask your neighbor, at least with me up here watching – you are once again asking yourself, “Where in the *world* is he going with this story?”****For most of us, Christmas is already a quickly fading memory. The stores have put whatever Christmas merchandise they have left on super discount clearance to make room for the already-burgeoning displays of chocolate affections for your Valentine. The USA television network finished up their “Twelve Days of Christmas” movie marathon on Christmas Day, of course, and have moved on to some new way to promote bang-bang, shoot-em-up cinema. The boxes and cartons, the Styrofoam and bubble wrap, the brightly colored paper in which our gifts were packaged have all been discarded. Depending how your credit cards cycle, you may already be facing the Christmas bills.

And yet, this morning we are challenged by the Church Calendar, to pause just one more moment, to remember that Christmas is not a day, but a season. The Christmas story is not about an event, but a *journey*: The babe was born, the angels sang, the shepherds adored, and everyone went home happy and fulfilled – aaahhh! Not hardly! The Christmas story comes at the *beginning* of the Gospel, at the beginning of the story of Christ’s work of redemption. As our Gospel for this second Sunday of Christmas tells us, the very next thing after the miracle of Jesus’ birth was that the family had to pack up and run. They had to undertake a journey filled with peril and promise, so that the story could go on, so that the *great journey* could continue.

Dear friends, the story of Christmas is not about a single event in the life of Jesus Christ, or in the history of God’s involvement with creation – it is about the *journey*. The Christian life is not about a single event: a flash of conversion, a moment of decision, an instant of new birth – it is about the journey of a *lifetime*. In its insistence on seasons rather than days, in its rhythm and its circling round on itself year after year, the calendar of the Church pushes us to recognize that we are called not to instantaneous completion – but to a *journey* – with Christ and with one another. We may look toward some end of time, we may hope for a heavenly home. But our story isn’t about the rest at home – it is about the road that leads homeward. Our story isn’t about the end of time – it is about how we *spend* the time between. Our story isn’t about the destination – it is about the *great journey*... and the treasures, and the tears, with which we fill our hearts and our minds and our souls along the way.

Happy New Year – and... Merry Christmas!