

THE ADVENT JOURNEY

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, 2010

On the Text: Propers for the Day

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We often talk about processes that take some time as a journey, even if that process does not involve movement, as in the ordinary definition of a journey as going someplace. The most obvious example of such a journey is the spiritual journey each of us has made from being a new-born baby who knew almost nothing, who could hear, but not yet see, whose brain was not yet well enough developed to be able to think about anything more than the basic desires of hunger and want and a desire to be comfortable, from that to a child with a wonder at the world and who begins to ask, “Who made all this?” That journey can take many years and continues until the result is an adult with a strong faith in Jesus Christ and his Resurrection and what that means for us and our salvation – in the words of the Nicene Creed: “Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary. And was made man.”

The Advent season is a journey too, always beginning on a Sunday and going for three more Sundays and a few days before reaching its end – and its culmination – in Christmas. The Advent wreath is a symbol of that journey for us. You may not have noticed under all of the greenery, but the basis for the Advent wreath is a wheel, with four spokes. The four colored candles are placed at the junctions where the spokes meet the rim of the wheel. The axle of the wheel is the white, Christ Candle, which we do not light until after sundown on Christmas Eve. To some, the wheel represents the circle of the seasons. No matter how you think of it, the center of the wheel and the center of our attention, is not on us, or anything else other than Jesus Christ Himself. He is not just the reason for the season, for the Advent season, the Christmas season, or any other season; it is because He is the reason for everything, as we shall see when we hear the Gospel lesson for Christmas Eve.

The journey to the first Advent can be said to have begun at Creation and contains many smaller journeys within that larger journey: from Adam’s journey into temptation and sin that began mankind’s trek outside the Garden; Noah’s boat ride; Abraham’s journey from Ur to Canaan; Jacob’s journey in old age to Egypt to see his son Joseph and die there; the journey of Moses and the Children of Israel back to the Promised Land; their political journey from being led by someone picked God, such as Moses and then Joshua through the time of the Judges until the time of the Kings, with Saul as the first King whose reign began in about 1095 BC. After 40 years of Saul’s mostly misrule, David took the throne and established the line of Davidic Kings. The time of the Kings was also the time of the Prophets. Of course, there were prophets before the time of David, the greatest of whom was Moses. However, from the time of David, the many prophets that arose seemed to play a more visible role in the description of the history of the Children of Israel. Israel’s journey had taken them in dissension and division immediately after Solomon died, and the Israel of the twelve tribes divided into two countries with ten of the tribes

in the north calling themselves, Israel; and the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin calling their union, Judah. The northern tribes quickly fell away from God and were ministered to by Elijah and Elisha and other prophets. It seemed that the Northern Kingdom just couldn't keep from worshiping other gods such as Baal and marrying outside of the tribes in disobedience to God's orders. The reward for that was that God eventually allowed Sargon of Assyria to come down in 721 BC and conquer them and carry them all off into captivity – the ten lost tribes that never returned. But Judah carried on until they too fell away from faith and into sin so that God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to conquer them and carry them off to Babylon in about 588 BC.

During their time in captivity there, the Jews were led and comforted by the prophecies of mainly Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, but also by Obadiah, Haggai, and Ezra.

Being conquered by Babylon marked the end of Judah's independence for centuries. Judah spent 70 years in exile in Babylon before they were allowed to return to Jerusalem by Darius I of Persia. Even after being allowed to return to Judah and Jerusalem, the Jews remained under the rule of some conqueror. They lived under Persian rule until 338 BC when the Persians were conquered by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. They had received their last prophecy from God through Malachi in about 400 BC, and their next 400 years were under foreign rule and of silence from God until they heard a voice crying in the Wilderness, saying, [Matthew 3:2-3 Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. 3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.](#)

What the Jews did not know, or could not recognize was there were other, smaller, shorter journeys that had taken place before the rough looking man named John, who dressed in leather and camel's hair and ate locusts burst onto the scene. About 30 years before that, an angel had come down from heaven and visited a young woman, who was a virgin; and the angel had announced to her that she had been chosen by God and said to her: [Luke 1:31-33 31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. 32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: 33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.](#) That visit by the angel put Mary on a journey, the course and end of which she could not have imagined. She was betrothed to Joseph, and an angel had to talk to him to convince him to go ahead and marry Mary and raise the child she was to bear. This was a very important journey, because we know that without that journey, there would not be the Advent that we celebrate this season, no Christmas, no Crucifixion, no Resurrection, no Easter, and no salvation, ... unless God decided to make salvation possible in some other way, which He, no doubt, could do.

Mary's spiritual and physical journeys can help guide us on our Advent journey. What got me started thinking about journeys was a piece I saw about manger scenes that makes it clear that what happened in the days before Christmas did indeed require journeys, several of them. This is an idea I read about over 3 years ago that put in my sermon to you in 2007. The idea is that you can keep Advent more properly in your mind if you set up your manger scene on the

first day of Advent, the first Sunday in Advent; but set it up the way it would have been four weeks before the birth of Christ. You might have some animals in it, a donkey, a horse, or a camel, and there might be a person there sometimes, but no shepherds or sheep. You might change these around from day to day; but Joseph and Mary and the wise men would be nowhere in sight. You might put the wise men and their camels in another room and move them closer to the manger scene each day; but remember, the wise men don't get there until January the 6th, the day of the Epiphany. Joseph and Mary and perhaps a donkey do not appear until 7 or 8 days before Christmas day, and then they start out across the room or perhaps in another room to signify that they start in Nazareth because it is 80 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem; and there are no planes or trains or busses. They will either have to both walk the whole distance or maybe Mary could ride the donkey, or ride in a cart pulled by the donkey. After all, she is only a week away from giving birth! As St. Luke says: Luke 2:4-5 *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.*

Yes, "she was great with child", but it is not impossible that she might have been able to have walked 10 miles a day. We have to remember that at that time, almost everybody walked everywhere they had to go. Only a few could afford to own a donkey; horses were reserved for the military, which in that day meant the Roman Army. Everybody walked, everywhere, except for the high-ranking Roman soldiers, and perhaps people such as the Prefect, Pontius Pilate. The ordinary person of that day was in much better shape than most people of today. So, for the figurines of Joseph and Mary to get to the stable, it should take about 8 days; but the figure of the Baby Jesus should not be placed in the manger until sometime after sunset on Christmas Eve.

Using your manger scene in this way is a great way to teach the story of the birth of Jesus to small children. For grown-ups, we hope we do not need to be taught it, but we can all probably profit from being reminded of just how the story took place in time – slowly, because our own Advent journey also takes place slowly, in time, as we live our lives. In our spiritual journey, it is best if we walk also, and don't try to run or ride a horse.

For Mary, the trip to Bethlehem was but a small part of her Advent journey, which covered all of Jesus' life: from raising him as a child; the flight to Egypt; the experience of His staying behind at the Temple when He was 12; the period from just after that until He was 30 years old, about which we know very little; and then the whirlwind three years of His ministry that ended in His Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and Ascension 40 days after that.

Our entire lives are also an Advent journey, a journey towards Christ's Second Coming; and each of us has no idea how that journey will end. Jesus may come while we are still alive; and then again, He may not come for many years. Remember, God wants his house to be full at the great dinner He gives; He does not want there to be empty seats at His table. That Second coming will wait until all of the elect are ready to be gathered in, for as Jesus said in John 6:39 *39 And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.* So whether that Second Coming on the

Last Day takes place while we are alive or not, does not matter; it is a day we should look forward to, because none that are His shall be lost.

The Readings and Psalm for today point to each of Jesus' comings, but not all of them point to both of them. Today's Gospel precedes last week's in time and points to Jesus' ministry on earth that will lead to the Cross. The Epistle, which we heard part of last Sunday as the Introit, looks to the Second Coming with joy because Jesus is not only our Savior, but also our judge. The OT lesson points to John, and then Jesus, and then in a veiled way to the Second Coming. The Psalm is a three-part prayer to God to return to Israel as its Shepherd and save it, a prayer for the sending of the Messiah, and thus, at least in an immediate sense, a prayer for the First Coming.

It is the Collect that speaks to both Comings. At its beginning, its first clause is a paraphrase of the second verse of the Psalm: **O Lord, raise up, we pray Thee, Thy power, and come among us, and with great might succor us;** To ask for God to come among us is to ask for the Messiah, to ask for Jesus; but we now know that He came in great humility in the First Coming; but that He will come in Power and Majesty in the Second Coming. Massey Shepherd says, "**in the first He came to save; in the Second, He comes to succor and relieve.**" The reason for our problems and their solution is given in the middle of the Collect: **that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, Thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us;** I have suggested that we might better walk rather than run, but Hebrews 12:1-2 suggest an intermediate course: Hebrews 12:1-2 **ESV Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.** However, the phrase "run the race" in the Greek is a figure of speech that can mean "complete the task" But what is our task, the task of every Christian? To go through our lives with an ever-growing faith, shedding not just our sins, but even our decreasing our propensity to sin so that we may stand before Jesus on the Last Day and be welcomed. We are hindered in completing our task by the weight of our sins and wickedness, but we must go forward with endurance, following the example that Jesus set for us on the Cross. Yes, we go forward with joy, in faith, to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, but we also do so in humility and penitence, more so for His Second Coming. One does not strut before the throne of God in Pride.

The lesson for every day in this penitential season of Advent is to pray and meditate in penitence in preparation for the Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The emphasis for today is given to us in the Collect that we must **endure** and **persevere** in our efforts to grow our faith and become more like what Jesus wants us to be. We cannot complete our Advent Journey unless we persevere. We must persevere like Mary and Joseph on their trek to Bethlehem, ... and like Jesus on the Cross. That is our task: to persevere and endure in our preparation for His Coming

again. The Advent state of mind of penitent preparation and joyful anticipation is not just for a few days before Christmas; it is for every day of our lives.

AMEN

Let us Pray.

Almighty and most Merciful Father, who hast sent Thy Son, Jesus Christ to teach us and redeem us from the great weight of our sins; Grant us through Thy most mighty Power the grace to instill in us the spirit of this Advent season, so that we shall keep in our hearts the knowledge of our constant need to be ready at all times for Thy Son's arrival to be our Judge, that with the help of the Holy Spirit we may put away the desires of the flesh and the works of darkness, and with perseverance prepare for the joy that awaits us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*