

## SUDDENLY A JOURNEY

Christmas is about new things coming into your life – about you becoming new because of it.

One of our parishioners had been praying fervently for months that God would allow them to win the lottery. They listened to what I had been trying to teach about prayer, and they felt they had legitimate needs and good-enough plans for using the money so that God should approve and respond. But week after month rolled by with no results. At first this person kept praying more and more fervently, trusting phrases like “ask and you shall receive,” “if you ask anything in my name, I will do it,” “it is the father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom,” and so forth.

In time, however, disillusionment set in. And after that came anger. So the prayers began to berate God. “You liar! You never do anything you promise. You don’t really love me.” etc., etc.

Finally one day, in the midst of a particularly vicious attack, the atmosphere suddenly changed and seemed for a moment to fairly crackle, and then a quiet but very deep voice said sadly, “Give me a break. Buy a ticket.”

Christmas, we were reminded last week, is always associated with angels: the joy of the angels rejoicing, their announcement of great things about to happen, and our getting expectant and ready for the newness that is coming for us.

Christmas is not only about angels. It is also about journeys. Like the angels, and sometimes *because* of the angels, these journeys come suddenly – they come as a surprise. It never seems like we get a chance to get ready for them. Nevertheless, we suddenly get an opportunity to take a new journey. However, we do not always take the journey that is set before us.

I have always suspected that the angels appeared to many groups of shepherds and invited all of them to go to Bethlehem and see the child. Doubtless all of them intended to go at the moment of revelation, but only one group ever got there. The others decided they couldn’t leave their sheep. What if wolves were to come? What if something frightened the sheep and they scattered? What would the owners say if the shepherds so irresponsibly left the sheep? Or if the shepherds owned the

sheep themselves, what would their families say if there was such a loss of income for such a strange, unplanned journey? How would you explain going off to Bethlehem to see a baby in a manger when there was so much work to do? Don't you know that this is one of the biggest issues of Christmas?

Christmas does have a few wrinkles some people do not like to notice. The shepherds are in a cruel bind. Theirs is a hard decision. The story passes over it quickly because in Luke's day it was so obvious, but we sometimes miss it. The shepherds risk everything to get one glimpse of the baby the angels are so thrilled about. It does not make any sense on a practical, pragmatic level. It is irresponsible for shepherds to leave their sheep. Christmas always does that to us in some way: makes us choose between a spiritual possibility and what we consider to be pragmatic, realistic certainties. Christmas always invites us on a journey that can never be adequately explained to people who do not believe in angels.

I'm just wondering this morning if you have learned by now that you should be expecting an unexpected journey. Christmas never comes without this "sudden journey" appearing somewhere in the midst of whatever else we are doing. Christmas always invites us to take a trip of some kind – to go someplace we have never been before or see something we have never seen before. Yes, I know; trips can be intellectual, geographical, psychological, spiritual. That is not the real issue. Any journey that matters has at least two and usually three of these dimensions. What is certain is that Christmas does not leave us in the same "place" where it found us. And every time Christmas comes for us again, it moves us. Journeys are inseparable from Christmas. Luke's whole story starts out with Mary and Joseph going on a journey. Even Matthew knows that Christmas is about journeys – fleeing to Egypt, or following a star.

So one thing that needs saying every Advent is: "Give God a break. Buy a ticket." Watch for the journey that will suddenly appear before you. And when it comes, take it! Most of Christmas misses most people most of the time because we are too busy tending our sheep. We are too practical, too responsible, too reasonable and rational to let Christmas carry us into unknown territory.

You don't think Luke intended to make this point with his story? Guess again! It is one of the most important things he is trying to tell us. Buy a ticket. Go with it. Leave the old ways, the old goals, the old

commitments – at least for a while – and go find the wonder of Christ. Whatever of the old seems worthy to keep afterward, well and good. But drop everything you have to and go find the wonder of Christ.

One of the reasons we miss the journeys God sets before us is that God hides everything except the entrance. Satan works the other way around. Satan shows us the end of the journey and hides or minimizes the early stages. Satan tempts us with pictures of luxury or pleasure or fame or how much good we can do *at the end of the journey*. That's why we call it "temptation." Satan entices. The pictures are not quite accurate, of course. *Almost* accurate, but not quite. Satan hides the process from us – what we will have to do and become to get to the goals as he pictures them for us. Satan's journeys have us drooling over the end so much that we do not notice the entrance or the early steps and stages along the way.

God hides all but the entrance of the journey. Partly this is done so that undeveloped or unwilling people will not get on these paths and wreck themselves. If you are not hunting for it, watching for it – awake and alert – you will never notice the entrance. It is a built-in safety factor. Jesus told us, "*Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leads to life, and few there be who find it.*" That's a whole different sermon, but the point is still clear: most people do not even notice the journeys God has set before them.

Remember the tradition (that's why we have it): God did not invite Moses to go confront Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt. If that had been God's approach, the story would have ended with a dust cloud instead of a decalogue. God invited Moses to take a journey of only a few steps: to see a peculiar bush. It seemed to be burning, yet it wasn't. That was all! The entire history of Western Civilization goes back to those few steps to see that bush. The rest of the journey unfolded from there, but that was all Moses saw at first: Just the burning bush. Only the entrance.

God only shows the beginning of the journey – the first few steps. Therefore most people do not pay much attention to it. Of those who do notice, most do not turn aside to follow the path. Because God was eager to free the Israelites from bondage, God had been showing that crazy bush to everybody within a thousand miles for generations, but nobody would turn aside, nobody would notice or take the journey – until Moses. It's an enigma. Only Arthur can draw the sword from the stone, yet the stone is always there, waiting for someone to be Arthur.

Now a new Moses has come. Who turns aside to see? A few shepherds. That's it. (That's it?!) Nobody else comes, according to Luke. And the shepherds don't get told much. Nothing about the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, the Cross, the Resurrection – or the endless spiritual Kingdom that God, in grace and love, is inviting us into. “Go see a baby in a manger.” That's all! Only the entrance is showing.

This helps remind us that some kind of journey will be waiting for each of us, ready for our discovery. And there will be wonder within it, but at the same time it will not look very big or great. Certainly not in terms of the affairs of the world. Only the entrance will show. We will be lucky not to miss it. If we do notice, we will be tempted not to turn aside for it. We are, after all, very busy; we have sheep of our own to tend. God knows, if we take any side trips to Bethlehem we won't get everything else done we have promised ourselves and others we would do. Never mind all that! This year buy a ticket – take the trip!

If only I could find the right words to bring it to focus. Christmas is not just *about* a journey; it *is* a journey. That is one of the reasons for its great power. That is, even people who have neither an inkling of nor interest in Christianity or in what Jesus Christ is all about are still drawn by the Christmas atmosphere. And one of the reasons Christmas draws is because it is such a powerful symbol of The Quest. Quest for what? Well, for truth, for love, for God, for beauty, for peace, for meaning, for joy. It depends, I suspect, on how your own mind works. But Christmas does carry this aura of THE QUEST for whatever it is that is truly most important.

On this level, Christmas is the battleground between hope and cynicism. Christmas claims that The Quest is still worth taking – that some journey can still take us toward the truth or beauty or love we hunger for. And other people (and other voices within us) also say, “Baloney! There is no true meaning or whatever else you think you seek. There are maybe fleeting moments of irrational happiness, but nothing cosmic: No God. No master plan or purpose.”

So there is now also what we call a “secular Christmas” that represents this battle between despair and hope in general. And much of what goes on in December, in terms of gifting and singing and gatherings and all, is really a societal ritual in which the whole world asks itself each year whether in general it wants to go on being hopeful, or if it has gone truly pessimistic and cynical. There is much emotion over such a big, general issue. And those who cast any dispersions on the general

glow of the secular Christmas are considered enemies by those who consider that keeping the glow and helping to make it brighter is a vote for hope and the possibility of happiness in general.

None of this has anything to do with Jesus Christ or Christianity. Put another way: A person can participate in the activities and warm feelings of Christmas and have no awareness of or intention of getting mixed up with the Jesus of history who ended up on the business end of a Roman cross because of a WAY of Life He refused to give up. The real Christmas still invites people to try on and walk in this new WAY of Life – in a very serious, day-by-day, intentional, and deeply committed awareness.

So there is a secular (societal) Christmas in which everybody “votes” – by the enthusiasm with which they participate – for pessimism (Scrooge) or optimism (Tiny Tim). And there is a very specific Christmas which is entirely linked with the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, whom some of us call “The Christ.” It is one of the great ironies that Christians and cynics and atheists and pessimists find themselves in agreement on this one point: that the secular Christmas is an empty sham, except for its very real impact on the economy.

When I was a small boy we lived in Glendale, California, not quite a block away from Forest Lawn cemetery. It was like a neighborhood park for us. I got to gather swan eggs for the gardener, and there were endless mysteries to explore. It was a wondrous place in the old days. And of course there were many stories connected with it. I was reminded of one recently.

A frequent question to Forest Lawn personnel is, “What was the most expensive funeral you can remember?” One mortician didn’t have to think long. Among his experiences, he remembered the funeral of an embittered man who had left his ex-wife and children almost nothing – just enough to make it clear he had not forgotten them. He then left the rest of his money to provide for his own ostentatious farewell. The amount was \$200,000. In today’s values that would be close to \$750,000.

The morticians didn’t know what to do. They looked around for the most expensive casket made. It was a bronze beauty for \$18,000, may he rest in peace. In the man’s memory, they commissioned someone to create and build a beautiful rose window for \$25,000. When they had done everything they could think of to ensure an elaborate and fancy

affair, they discovered there was still \$100,000 left. What to do? Their solution, after considerable thought, was orchids – \$100,000 worth of orchids.

How many people came to this marvelous affair? Three. Apart from Forest Lawn personnel – three.

Appalling to think of such waste. Hard not to think of the “good” we could have done with such money. Painful to know anything of the human need within five miles of that place and to think of how many could have been helped. But even that is not what gets to us most. Somehow that poor man had missed all the journeys. Forget the money; what brings tears to the eyes is that he had missed all the journeys!

Perhaps it was a very fortunate day when this man’s wife and children had sense enough to leave him. But wasn’t there anybody who could get through? The real waste was not in the orchids; they only symbolized it. For this man, there were no miracles, no journeys, no love, no Christmas. All of it was all around him. It was available. He may even have thought he was in it and doing it and knowledgeable about it all.

It does great harm to settle for counterfeits. It is terribly sad to see the world paying so many millions of dollars every year and coming up with a Christmas without Jesus. God would never leave it at a bronze coffin and half an acre of wilted orchids. Only a human would think to bequeath himself with a sneer like that.

There is a special journey waiting for each one of us. Only its beginning – its first few steps – will be visible to us. There will be “wonder” connected to it in some way, yet we will be almost certain that we do not have time for it – that we have too many other tasks and responsibilities. And we will start to turn away.

But this year maybe we will surprise God back. Maybe we will be awake and alert. And seeing the journey, we will turn aside for it and then go on it. Don’t you think that’s a good idea? Buy a ticket!