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### **The Advent Journey Home Begins Again**

By some estimates 42 million Americans will take to planes, trains and automobiles to travel this Thanksgiving week. For some, they may have been putting off holiday visits home for some time, with the economy still not back to what it was and households reviewing every purchase and expense. For others, the journey to gather with family and friends around a festive table is as much a part of this holiday as is the turkey, stuffing and cranberry sauce. It is amazing that even though we know that it's no fun to travel by air anymore with the screenings and the pat-downs or the many traffic jams await us on the road – I know our family slogged out many holidays stuck on the New Jersey Turnpike (the purgatory of interstates). Yet the desire to return to wherever we might call home is far too great and primal to dampen and to discourage by traffic and long lines. I remember seeing a news report some years ago of millions of Chinese workers caught up in the transportation meltdown that accompanied a late winter storm. Some of the people were shown sleeping in train stations and they had not visited their home villages for years and because of the storm they were losing the one brief window of time to return home to celebrate the New Year – the most important Chinese holiday. When it was clear that they would not make the journey home, the look on their faces was devastating.

I find myself again and again drawn to journey or pilgrimage metaphors when describing what it means to believe. For me, faith is not about acquiring a certain amount of knowledge and ascending to an agreed upon explanation of doctrine, it is about getting out of bed each morning and opening our lives to goodness, surprise, and a deeper appreciation that each day is a gift and that we should live our lives aware that all is sacred.

Our response to a living God should never be static or unchanging - running in place or treading spiritual water is not an option - so the idea of moving or seeking makes sense to me as a believer in Christ. I become most aware of God when I am searching, questioning, wandering, fleeing from something I should confront, and hiding from things that I should accept or face. I find that my best prayer time is not spent on my knees but rather on my daily walk - being in motion, breathing in and out, raising up my concerns and those of others, and giving thanks for God's gift of creation as one season turns into the next.

What is it then we are walking and moving towards? God. God is our home, the place we were born into, the parent who never disappoints and always provides, a location that never moves, a home that can never be sold or foreclosed on, and state of love that calls us back wherever we are. God is so much more than our hopes. That is part of the reason that being pulled into the crush and rush of trying to be home for the holidays can be such a bittersweet time.

In September I made my own pilgrimage of sorts back to the suburbs of Cleveland where I grew up. I drove by my old house and hoped that the new owners had not cut down the tree I had planted in second grade. They had! I drove by my elementary, junior and high schools, even taking my car for a spin on the playground which I thought was huge but now looks tiny. It was a poignant, middle-age goodbye for me in many ways. Seeing school age friends I would probably never see again and acknowledging that the extended family of my youth no longer calls me back to my Midwestern roots and that my home has moved to another place.

The season we enter today, Advent, and the Christmas season that we await, is about how we are going to begin again the journey with God. It is a journey where Christ is at its beginning, center and end. Before we can arrive each year to the crèche in Bethlehem with the shepherds and angels and the Wise Men, we have some spiritual work to do. Our gospel today helps us in that regard. It reads like Mark did not get the pre-holiday memo of cheer and joy. Jesus speaks about suffering, the sun becoming darkened, and the stars falling from heaven. Beware and keep awake. It's the constant drumbeat of Advent waiting.

Readings from the prophet Isaiah feature prominently this time of year. They give us the image of the Jesse tree, "a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse." Jesse, the father of David, whose home town Bethlehem will beckon Joseph and the pregnant Mary to make their way home on their own journey from Nazareth. Enduring, peaceful images are captured in Isaiah that make us all long for a more peaceful world instead of the world we know all too well - a world torn apart of war, poverty, social unrest, greed, crime, injustice and political oppression. How much more could we become or how much suffering would be relieved if we more actively worked for a world where peace is the natural course and, in the prophet's words, "a wolf shall live like a lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and lion and fatling lie altogether, and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11)? It is from Isaiah that we hear: "A child has been born for us, a son given to us; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9)

When we pick up with Isaiah in Chapter 64, appointed for today, the people of Israel had arrived home word after decades of living in exile, far away from Jerusalem and all that they had once known to be theirs. While in exile, the constant refrain of the prophets was to reassure them that God had not forgotten them. They will return home again and rebuild what was destroyed. They will pick up the pieces of your lives and flourish again.

But when they finally made it back home, the reality did not match the anticipated ideal. Those who had remained behind were not exactly rolling out the red carpet. The streets were not paved with gold, and milk and honey were in short supply. It wasn't so easy to rebuild their lives and reclaim what had been lost.

Sound familiar? Returning home anytime but especially around the holidays can be tough. Not having a home to return is much harder still. Revisiting memories of who we once were and how others knew us can be unsettling. Rebuilding our lives after losing a loved one, going through a painful divorce, or filling an empty nest without the clamor and fullness of yesterday is all far from easy.

Where is God? Isn't that the heart of the matter? If we accept God's invitation to walk and seek and wander, where is God and how do we know God is near? These are the questions I hear: "Are you there, God, when my hair is falling out from the next round of chemo?" "Are you there, God, as every door remains closed in my search for a new job?" "Are you there, God, when a deep sadness envelops me and I just can't seem to shake it?" "Are you there, God, if and when I forget the name of my spouse or son or daughter in my last days?" "Make some noise, God! Show your face because all I'm getting is silence and sometimes I need more than holy silence."

The reaction of the people in Isaiah was to wait for the kind of God they had heard about: the Technicolor/Ten Commandments version of God who spoke in thunder, earthquakes and fire or the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain kind of God. They wondered what we all perhaps wonder when things don't seem to be going so well. Is it something I did, God? If I was wrong, forgive me and do not punish me anymore. I will be better.

That kind of lament and public confession may be hard for us to understand. We are light years away from a worldview of an angry God smiting down his people. But it's interesting to note that, when things got hard

and would get harder still, where was God in the story of Isaiah? A basic question that accompanies human suffering, whether in the epic cruelty and tragedy of the Holocaust or the sudden death of a child or the drawn out slow decline of someone dear, is, "Where is God?"

In the next chapter of Isaiah, we get God's answer: "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me." I said, "Here I am, here I am...I held out my hands all day long." That's a far cry from the angry God looking down upon us waiting for us to mess up. And it is a picture of God that is far more powerful than fire, thunder and earthquakes.

May we leave this place this morning having heard a simple message. The God we worship is one who is ready to be sought out and be found. Church is a good a place to begin but it is clearly not the only place to seek and find. We do not possess sole claim to God's spirit which is alive and well in the lives of those we meet and those who may never walk through the door of a church.

We wait and prepare and ask again, "Where is God in this world full of darkness and pain?" Soon and very soon we will get the eternal answer: "Here I am," God always reminds us. "Not only the One at the beginning of all of creation, but I am with you always in Jesus Christ. If you search me out, you will know me."

The waiting and the alertness that this Christmas pre-season demands can be a rich time. God can shape us in ways that Isaiah had spot-on, as a potter shapes clay. We are the clay, and you are our potter. So then, form us into a people who are more ready to encourage than condemn, more willing to forgive than to keep a grudge that only holds us back, more able to see our own shortcomings before we label another as failing to live up to our expectations. And finally, may we pray that God will shape us into the person we were intended to be in God's eyes all along. Knowing where we have come from, who made us, and where our journey will end in God's time, we can live out our days knowing that sooner or later, we will all arrive home again.