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Are We There Yet?

Luke 1:46b-55

Most of the conversations that I have had about Christmas in the last few days have included someone saying, "I can't wait until it is over" or "I am so ready to be done with this Christmas." These words are just another way of saying, "Are we there yet?" It makes me a little sad. I understand that people are tired. The season started in the world of retail before Halloween. The carols have been playing in the stores for weeks and I actually heard my first Christmas carol this year back in October. The traffic has been terrible, people have been rude, shopping is exhausting and when it comes right down to it, many of us have holiday fatigue. I understand all of that, but we will not allow these realities to taint our journey to the manger. Most every trip we take has its minor frustrations. Yet, when we allow the minor frustrations to rule over us, we miss out on the wonder and joy of the journey.

Kevin read a brief passage from the ancient scriptures having to do with the long journey of the Israelites who traveled with Moses. I cannot imagine what they expected when they left Egypt. They had been slaves for hundreds of years, they trusted Moses to lead them out of their bondage, and when they get to the desert, the journey seems endless. For the better part of forty years, the Israelites wandered through the desert. I am quite certain they began to ask, "Moses, are we there yet?" very early in the trip and then, worried that they would never arrive, they asked that question each and every day.

There are those who think that Moses was lost in the desert. He of course had no map to the Promised Land; he was following God's lead. I am convinced that the Israelites were never lost, just not ready. They spent forty years in the desert because they were not ready to enter into the Promised Land. They were not prepared in mind or heart to be the chosen people of God. They were not ready to let go of their old image as oppressed slaves to embrace their new image as God's beloved. So, for a generation, they journeyed, they changed, they prepared, they began to see themselves in a new way, and in the process they were transformed. God understood that if they arrived at their destination too soon, they would be unable to embrace the life that God envisioned for them. They needed to put aside their old sense of self to be open to embracing their new image as the children of God.

The journey was difficult, it was filled with obstacles, it was long and exhausting, but it ultimately led them to the land that God had promised.

Mary, young as she was also took a journey. She was minding her own business when she was visited by an angel. She was young, uneducated, poor and unwed, and never expected what God offered to her. She is to be the mother of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

Rather than respond with fear, anger, anxiety, she offers these beautiful words to her God. We call it the magnificat, because it is the beautiful response of one with an open heart, with love for God and with a soul willing to follow God's lead.

[Read the scripture passage from Luke.]

Maybe it was because she was so young that Mary was so open to what God gave her. She rejoices in that which was more than a mere embarrassment in her culture. In a time when her pregnancy could have cost her her family and possibly even her life, she receives the news of the angel as a gift. Yes, a gift from God. I have read this passage more times than I can count and I am always amazed by it. Though I know it through and through, it always comes to me as a surprise. I stand in awe of Mary's courage and faith.

Life is a journey. Faith is a journey. Asking, "Are we there yet?" supposes that there is a destination when in fact our journey with the Divine is eternal. We will celebrate our arrival at the manger tomorrow night, but we will not remain there. We will continue the work of Christmas long after December 25th. We will continue to grow a heart for God long after celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Our journey of faith is difficult because we live in a "yes, but" world. Nothing new here. The ancient Israelites said, "Yes" to the journey with Moses, but shortly into the journey, began to offer their opposition. They were concerned at every turn. They were worried about food and water and basic living conditions. They agonized about their future and more than once discounted the power and presence of Yahweh in their midst. "Yes" they wanted freedom, but they did not want to be responsible for their choices. "Yes" they wanted to leave Egypt, but they were not sure they wanted to continue the journey to the Promised Land. "Yes" they would follow Moses, but they were not sure they could trust him. "Yes" they believed in Yahweh, but they were not willing to remain loyal to God through thick and thin.

We live in a "yes, but" culture as well. "Yes" we call ourselves Christian, but we are not sure we want to really live a life that reflects our faith. "Yes" we want to be disciples of Christ, but we are not willing to turn down the volume on the expectations of the world and listen intently to the leadings of Jesus. "Yes" we want to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but we are too busy with the other demands of Christmas. "Yes" we want to live

in the Kingdom that God envisions, but we are not willing to let go of the values that the world holds dear. "Yes! But..."

The beauty of Mary is that she offered only, "Yes". She did not add any restrictions or reservations. She accepted God's gift to her fully and completely and offered only joy and gratitude in response. She was a young teenager, living under the oppression of the Romans and the strict laws of her faith and yet, even so, she sings a song of joy when she hears the news of her pregnancy.

We journey to the manger each and every year, not just to pass the time, but to take the opportunity to embrace a changed heart and mind and grow ever closer to the purposes of God.

Howard Thurman puts it this way, "Christmas is the brooding presence of the Eternal Spirit making crooked paths straight, rough places smooth, tired hearts refreshed, dead hopes stir with newness of life. It is the promise of tomorrow at the close of the day, the movement of life in defiance of death, and the assurance that love is sturdier than hate, that right is more confident than wrong, that good is more permanent than evil."

Not one with an education or a deep understanding of the political realities of her time, the young Mary sings of a revolution. It is a song of God's vision for turning this world upside down. It is a place where the powerful will be set aside, the poor embraced and hope will be the reality of all. It is a revolution both spiritual and political. Hers is a song of gratitude and a vision for the Kingdom of God. And in this turning, we are all given a new life and a new way of seeing life. The words of Mary's song lead us to the joy found at the heart of the new life we experience in the birth of Jesus.

Author J. Barrie Shepherd speaks to that reality as he writes, "joy is not found here on the surface, but joy under girds, supports, sustains all moments of my life. The joy in you arises in the certitude that every day, and every mood, the happy, the sad are in your (God's) loving hands, hands that will bring me home at last to kneel beside the manger. In such a joy, God, let me spend this day." - J. Barrie Shepherd

This birth heals the hurt and hollowness within us. This birth promises hope in the midst of despair, light in the dark and love that is eternal. The birth of Jesus changes us from living based on our fears to living with confidence and courage. The birth of Jesus comes when we are ready or not. The birth of Jesus comes when the tree is trimmed, the packages are wrapped and every family member we love is near. The birth of Jesus comes when there is no tree, no gifts, and no family. The birth of Jesus comes when the day is perfect and when the day is a disaster. The birth of Jesus comes to all of us. This birth does not seek to merely comfort us where we are, but to empower us to become the children of God we dream of being. The birth of Jesus comes no matter what our circumstances. He brings us light for our journey and hope for the living of our days. It

is not too late to stop the mania of the season and to find the time and space to be inspired anew by the song of Mary.

When our daughter was five years old, I left work, picked her up from kindergarten and raced home so that she could change into her Christmas dress and tights. She looked adorable. We then hurried over to the mall so that she could have her picture taken with Santa. I was trying to get this done before an evening meeting. She was used to fitting things into the dinner hour before I had to get back to work. So, we rushed to get into line at the mall and then we began the wait. She was hungry; I kept checking my watch. She was bored; I kept trying to entertain her. It was a long wait. I tried to talk her into coming back another day a couple of times, but no, she was there and she wanted to see Santa. Time dragged on. We stood in line for nearly an hour and a half. It was getting to the point where I was going to have to leave to get back to work, but finally we were the next in line. I was ecstatic. We were going to get this done and I would not have to come back and spend an hour or so in line on another day. So, there we were next in line and Lori begins to cry. I did not notice it at first and then I realized she was sobbing. And within the blink of an eye, she went from sobbing to throwing a full scale fit.

I tried to reason with her. Of course, the people behind me in line wanted us to move forward. Lori was wailing. She was crying so hard that she could not tell me what was wrong. I was caught between concern that something was wrong, that she was sick or hurt, and anger that after standing in line for an hour and a half she was having a melt down. There were so many people waiting behind us that I had no choice but to scoop her up in my arms and carry her out to the car. When we got to the car and she finally calmed down, I finally got her to tell me the problem. When it came right down to it, when she was next to talk to Santa, when it was her turn, the only thing she could think to tell him was that she wanted socks. She looked at me as if I would instantly understand, but I didn't. She looked me right in the eye and said, "Mom, you can't ask Santa for socks. Nobody asks Santa for socks."

That was it. She had dressed for the occasion, she had spent over an hour waiting for her turn, but when it came right down to it, she was not ready, not in any way, shape or form.

Mary calls across the ages and asks us if, in our faith journey, we are ready for the gifts that God offers us. Is our answer to God, "yes, but..."? Or in the celebration of the birth of Jesus are we open to accepting the gifts of forgiveness for our errors and the harm we have caused, light for the darkness that fear brings, hope that is stronger than anxiety or even grief, healing that makes us whole, and joy in this life and life eternal? These are the gifts of the Christ child and they have already been given. As we make our final preparations for this celebration, may we prepare our hearts to welcome this birth, the gifts that Jesus brings and the life that God envisions for us.

“Are we there yet?” Almost. When we arrive at the manger, will we say “yes, but” to our God or a wholehearted “YES!”?

Prayer: Help us to finish our external preparations for this Christmas celebration, O God, so that we can focus on preparing heart and soul for the gifts that you so generously offer to us. Amen.

Call to Worship: It is true for men, women, and children. You plan for a trip. You pack your bags and get them perfectly organized in the car. You put together snacks for the trip and fill up the tank with gas. Yet, within a few hours of leaving home, you begin to ask the age-old question, “Are we there yet?” This is a day to celebrate the journey. We have spent four weeks making our way to the manger. On the journey we have encountered the wonder and awe of God’s holiness in our midst. We are not there quite yet, but this is a day to embrace the journey, to pause and give thanks for the path that we have taken and to look forward with joy and anticipation. I invite you to remember the ancient journey toward Bethlehem as we sing together.