

Walking the Walk

Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

Do you have a dream? What's your dream? The big news of this sermon is that what you want, what you dream for yourself, is exactly what God wants for you. Elizabeth O'Connor expressed this truth very powerfully: "We ask to know the will of God without guessing that God's will is written into our very beings." In other words, your fondest dream and God's deepest desire for you are the same.

Today is the second Sunday in the season of Advent, the Sunday of Joy. Advent is a way to mark our journey to Bethlehem's manger and beyond, to the crossroads of our lives today. Unless the hope, joy, love, and peace we touch on the way to Christmas are available to help us face the challenges and crises today, then our celebration of Christmas has little real meaning and no lasting value. But we gather in worship to insist that the themes of our Advent journey are the gifts we have to cope with every crisis we face. They are the precious treasures we possess that make us wealthy beyond measure.

On the journey of life, we each have two tasks. The first is to discover who we are and what we want on as deep a level as we possibly can. Life is *a journey inward to be taken* by each of us and a journey shared in community by all of us. In faith that what Elizabeth O'Connor said is true, then on this journey we also discover who God is and what God wants for us. The second task of life is to live according to this identity and direction we discover. It is not enough to understand. We must also let our *inward journey* shape who we become and what we do if we want to experience joy in a lasting and life-changing way. This is the promise and the challenge of following Jesus.

John the Baptizer appears early in Mark's Gospel. By the fourth verse of chapter one, he strode out into the wilderness to proclaim that something new was happening. John is not as strident in Mark as in Matthew. There is no "viper's brood" or "sons of snakes" according to Mark's Gospel. John still embodies Isaiah's words: "in the desert, make ready the Lord's road!" He brought the message of "a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins." John said,

The real action comes next. The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. [The one who's coming offers] holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out." (Mark 1, *The Message*)

Changing from the inside out does not mean that you deny who you are. On the contrary, it means seeking who you really are. It does not mean denying your passions. It does mean discovering your deepest passions and then shaping your life around them. We tend to think of John as a fire and brimstone preacher teaching the fear of God. Someone asked me recently why I don't ever seem to preach that way – that maybe fire and brimstone and the fear of God is not my style? That is probably true, but there are many ways to challenge people.

The message about the importance of the journey of knowing yourself more deeply, toward knowing God more clearly, is something I'm pretty passionate about. Elizabeth O'Connor, a favorite author of mine, has written many books with titles such as: *Journey Inward, Journey Outward, Eighth Day of Creation, Letters to Scattered Pilgrims, and Cry Pain, Cry Hope*. These are sensitive and thoughtful titles and her writing is generally sensitive and thoughtful. Though her writing is not really fire and brimstone, O'Connor is passionate that our life journey of knowing ourselves is central to knowing God. She has written:

The child so easy to mold, the adolescent so anxious to conform, becomes the adult shaped from without instead of from within. The person who has lost his true self has a hunger in him (her). It may be expressed in apathy or in industry. He may try to satisfy it with a job he works at fourteen hours a day or a family that is 'everything' to him' or success that is worth all striving or the acquisition of things of which there is no end of wanting. But there is nothing to fill the emptiness of the one who is not following the way of his or her own inner being!

Some may ask, what does this self-discovery nonsense have to do with Christian faith? What does it have to do with Christmas? Aren't we supposed to be discovering Jesus? I suggest, with great passion, that we must have both. The path of following Christ leads directly through your life and mine. The manger of Bethlehem lies in your heart and there is where Christ must be born. Again hear Elizabeth O'Connor:

When we discourage persons from being on an inward journey of self-discovery, we keep them from coming into possession of their own souls, keep them from finding the eternal city, keep them from being authentic persons who use their gifts and personality to mediate God's peace and God's love. He or she who tries to keep another from the pilgrim path of self-discovery is doing the devil's work, and a lot of frightened persons are about that work." (*Letters to Scattered Pilgrims*)

Were John the Baptizer here today, he might say that the presence of Jesus you meet in your life will change you from the inside out. Christ challenges and invites us to walk the journey in partnership with God – to learn more clearly who you are, what you want, and what you are willing to become.

Do you have a dream? My dream is that church will be a place, a space, of community and partnership where the inward journey can happen – a journey of understanding and living, the transformation of self and of the world in Jesus' name. What is your dream? what do you want? What, at the core of who you are, do you desire for your life? If you are going to be yourself, you are not going to fit anybody else's mystique." Before you can [be] yourself, however, you [have] to take the time to become yourself, to face yourself in your fundamental reality, and to peel away the accretions of mediocre or false values imposed by society, ambition, and self-interest. Only then [can] you find your truth and your reality. John Howard Griffin, *Thomas Merton: The Hermitage Years*, Burns & Oates, 1993)

So, welcome to the Advent journey – really the life journey. We have a slogan at Crossroads: "bring your questions and your wisdom; join us on the journey." It is actually much more than a slogan. Each of us has a profound meaning to the journey of

all of us. Jesus came to reveal the nature of God to us through his life, his teaching, and his example. He also came to reveal the nature of God in us. This year, let Christ be “born in us” and “revealed in us.” We will have missed Christmas if we don’t grasp the importance of God being born in us. Let Christ be born in you, on your journey, and you will have a true cause to celebrate Christmas this year. May the peace, love, hope, and joy of Advent be, not only your possessions this year, but also the gifts you give to the world in Jesus’ name.