

Sermon Advent 2C 2021: The Path for Christ To Come This Christmas

Introduction: Making our Way to Bethlehem

Many Christmases ago the Allen family made a journey.

It was long journey that took the better part of a day to get there;

And the better part of a day to return to our home, to Devon;

It was tiring and the lines in the airport were particularly long,

But it was worth everything we had to endure to be there.

“There” was my family’s home in Texas and “there” was the place

Where we were surrounded by the love and the closeness of family members of all ages

Some of whom we hadn’t seen very often over the years;

They have been calling me Yankee Frankie for a reason.

And when we came back, we weren’t the same people we were before our journey;

For though we were tired out from the travel;

There was a joyful sense of renewal and life and an assurance for me

That even though the literal location of home had changed;

As my Mother was living in a different house

Than the one on Lively Lane where I grew up;

The love we remembered and expected to find was still there

And making the journey made all the difference.

Each year during the season of Advent, we Christians begin a journey to take us home;

To take us home to Bethlehem; to take us home to God;

It’s an interior journey, a journey of the heart;

And we hope that this month long journey will prepare our hearts

For the coming of the Christ-child;

So that the road to our heart will be clear;

So that this time there will be enough room for Him

To be born in our lives again or to be born for the first time.

Now, most of us think that we know the way to Bethlehem and Christmas;

We can find it on the map, just a little way outside Jerusalem

It shouldn't be a problem.

But there is a problem;

And the problem is that so much has changed since our last visit;

So much has changed that many of us have forgotten how to even begin the journey

Much less remember how to get there.

A whole year has passed; a year that has brought many changes to our lives

Some of them good; some of them not so good; some of them heartbreaking;

Not to mention a pandemic that has turned all of our lives askew;

We're literally different people than we were a year ago

So the starting point of this year's journey is different, too.

Bethlehem is still there, waiting for us to come;

But the geography, the location of our lives

Has changed so much that we may need a little help starting off on our way.

Meeting John on the Way

Now, if you were to ask the Gospel writer, Luke, the way to journey to Bethlehem;

The way to come home to the Christ-child and to God's magnificent love for us;

He would tell us to go out to the desert, to go out into the wilderness.

Keep going until you get to the Jordan River, you can't miss it,

And there'll you'll find a man, a strange fellow,

Standing knee deep in the water, just baptizing people as fast as he can.

That'll be John the Baptist.

You ask him how to get to Bethlehem because if you and I really want to go there

He's the only one who can help us start to find the way;

All the Gospel writers say the same thing.

If you want to go to Jesus, if you want to walk the path that will take you home;
If you want to live a life with God where our faith matters;
Then you've got to meet with John on your journey there;
You've got to meet John to hear and respond to John's call to repent
John's call to everyone to change your life so that the road is open for Christ to enter in.

You see the season of Advent belongs, not to Jesus, but to John the Baptist;
It belongs to God's prophet in the wilderness
Munching on grasshoppers and wearing a camel hair shirt
Calling people to repent;
Calling people to change their lives because the Kingdom of God is at hand
Calling us to turn away from the hardness of our hearts;
So that we can accept God's forgiveness and find our way home to Bethlehem.

Now, I don't know about you, but I've never been very comfortable with people
Insisting that I repent of my stubborn, selfish, sinful ways;
After all, they're not really all that stubborn or selfish or sinful, are they?

I've attended enough revival meetings with one of my grandmothers to last a lifetime;
And they always left me unchanged
Or even more committed to the way I was living my life.

And John reminds me of those revival preachers;
Yelling at the top of his lungs to repent, to change, to turn your life around;
And you could probably hear John long before you saw him;
Hearing his one sermon, "repent", echoing off the barren, desert landscape.

But whether we like to go to the wilderness to see John and hear his one sermon or not;
The reality is that John's message is the start of the journey to Bethlehem;
John's call to repent, to turn is the beginning that every one of us must make
If we intend to find room for Christ this Christmas & allow God's love to bring us home

For it's only when we're willing to admit that we've lost our way, a little or a lot;
It's only when we're willing to admit that we've allowed other things
To come first in our lives before God;
That God will come to us; that God will forgive us
That God will take our hand and journey with us to Bethlehem,
Banishing our sins, offering us new life, and bringing us home.

Repentance is the first step and the daily step

When we lived in northern Virginia, I had a friend who was Roman Catholic priest;
Jim worked in the hospital at Georgetown University.
He was a hospital chaplain, visiting the sick, the mending, and the dying;
But once a month he made journey to the city jail
And after that to a convent of nuns to hear confessions.

He told me that on these days when he journeyed to the jail and the convent,
He probably met with thirty people over the course of the day,
Heard their confessions and offered God's forgiveness and grace.

In the jail, he heard a lot of hard things from the people who came to repent of their sins;
He heard people confessing to hurting other people, to shooting other people;
He heard people confessing to stealing to support their addictions,
He heard people confessing to stealing from and cheating others
To support their wealthy lifestyles.

He said it felt like being hit in the face with a brick;
Shocking him, because their sins were so far removed from his everyday life;
But in every case, with every person who truly sought a different life;
He offered forgiveness as the sign of God's love and the promise of new life in Christ.

And he told me he could see the look of complete relief and wonder on many faces;
Relief, because their repentance had made room for God to move in their lives;
And they could begin the journey again with God;
Or start on the road home for the first time.

After lunch, in the afternoon, he heard confessions in the convent;
The sisters would come to him one by one;
And confess their sins in order to move on in their lives with God.

He heard the nuns confessing to taking an extra piece of bread at lunch one day
When they didn't really want it and it left too little for the other nuns;
He heard nuns confessing to having bad thoughts about another person
And he heard them confessing to letting their minds wander
During daily prayers or during a talk someone was giving.

He said that it felt like cotton balls bouncing off his face after being in the jail;
But for these women, who had devoted their entire lives to God;
Who sought God's ways in all that they did;
These were real sins and came with all the hardness of heart,
With all the separation from God, with all the loneliness
Of the hardest criminal in the jail.

And just as in the jail, he said,
When he heard the confessions and offered God's forgiveness and grace;
Offered the promise that they could begin their walk with Christ anew
Freed from their sins; the look on their faces was utter relief.

I suspect that most of us here this morning would find ourselves
Somewhere in between these two groups of people most days;
Somewhere between being a convicted criminal and a devoted nun;
But we do have sins to confess, you and I;
We do have patterns in our lives and ways of living
That keep us from being open to God in our lives,
And from beginning our journey to Bethlehem this year.

C. S. Lewis, the great Christian author once wrote,

“Christianity has no message for those who do not realize they are sinners.”ⁱ

And so I invite you this morning to begin the journey to Bethlehem with John the Baptist;

I ask you to admit to God where you’re falling short in your relationship with Him

To admit to God where you’re falling short in your relationship with others.

Because when you and I confess, when we ask for God’s forgiveness,

God promises to forgive us and to touch our hearts with His grace and love;

God promises to come to us and lead us by another road in life;

A road that offers hope and light and love;

A journey that will bring us home this Christmas and all through the year.

So when we get to the confession of sin in the service in a few minutes;

Don’t just read along;

Be honest, say it as though you mean it;

For if you and I will confess our sins, brick or cotton puff;

We will begin the journey to Bethlehem in earnest;

We will be found by God who will take us by the hand and journey with us;

We will experience the merriest of Christmases;

And we will enter into the life that is really life.

Amen.

ⁱ Taken from a C. S. Lewis Reader