

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Fairfield, CT 06824
Nov. 19, 2006
Rev. Bennett A. Brockman

Daniel 12:1-4a
Hebrews 10:31-39
Mark 12:14-23

Winter Journey

Jesus said, "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; . . . Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter.

"Pray that it may not be in winter," Jesus says, when the journey is forced upon you. A savage time of year, when the way is bleak and grim, dangerous and slippery.

But the winter journey is forced on us sooner or later, when it feels like "the desolating sacrilege" has been set up on the altar of our hearts: by life-threatening changes—a death in the family or circle of closest friends, loss of a job, a bleak medical diagnosis; or even when the crisis is less overwhelming, when a friend doesn't call anymore, or when confidence is broken or loyalty betrayed.

Jesus recalled Daniel's prophecy about "the desolating sacrilege" and associated it with the profanation of the altar of the great Second Temple by the occupying Roman authorities of his day. We experienced this kind of end of the world imagery, apocalyptic imagery we call it, in the horrible scenes imbedded in our memory of the collapse of the World Trade Center Towers.

The desolating sacrilege and the winter journey all too often come upon us.

If it's any consolation, know that you are not alone when the winter journey is forced upon you. The winter journey is often part of the task of heroes of mythic grandeur. My favorite is Sir Gawain in the great Middle English poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The description of his solitary slog—and so often our journey feels solitary—clad in rusting steel armor, through the sleet and snow of winter in the most desolate region of England—makes me shiver to imagine it. T. S. Eliot reminded us that the Three Kings, the Magi, journeyed to find Jesus "in the bleak midwinter," as Christina Rossetti's hymn puts it. "A cold coming we had of it," Eliot has the Kings say. "Just the worst time of the year For a journey, and such a long journey: The ways deep and the weather sharp."

We also know something about those icy cold journeys, don't we?

The reading from Hebrews gives us an essential hint about getting through the winter journey. "You need endurance," the writer says. Endurance. Just keep plodding on, putting one foot in front of the other, through the icy landscape. "Just follow your nose,"

as one of my wife's graduate school advisors once told her. Endurance is an essential virtue.

But it matters, doesn't it, which way your nose is pointing! That's why for a Christian one of the great theological virtues comes into play: the virtue of hope. Hope is such a powerful virtue—it stands alongside Faith and Charity or Love as one of the cardinal virtues—because hope calls on the memory of God's presence in the past to give us confidence of God's presence in the present and assurance of God's presence in the future.

Every instinct of self-preservation in the winter journey demands that we point our nose toward the ground and look out for treacherous footing. That's what endurance is all about. But hope invites us to look upward: "See, he comes with clouds descending," the great Advent hymn of hope proclaims. Be of good cheer; the night is well past; the morning is coming, the voice of hope says.

Our own memory is the key to finding hope. One of the most crucial distinctions between adolescence and adulthood is that the adult remembers difficult times, winter journeys, that have been successfully negotiated. Adolescents can sometimes be so thoroughly overwhelmed because they have not yet formed such hope-inspiring memories.

That's a reason too why the Christian community we are part of is so important. Often enough in the winter journey our own memory just doesn't work. It checks out, apparently for the duration. A friend can really help, someone who remembers, with the writer of Psalm 30, that "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." We shepherd youngsters and accompany each other.

And you know, the Christian community has another great resource, the now three thousand year old collected memory of the People of God. It's called the Bible. The Old Testament as we call it is the memory of God's faithful love with the Hebrew people, the descendants of Israel. It's great story is how God led those people from slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea on dry land, through forty years of wandering in the desert, and finally into the Promised Land.

The New Testament is our Christian memory of God's amazing covenant with Jesus and through Jesus with each of us. It's great story is how God loved Jesus not only through a life of teaching and healing, but even beyond a sacrificial death, raising him from death. It is a memory we renew and participate in every time we celebrate and receive Holy Communion.

That's why we need the Bible so absolutely. It is our memory, our roadmap, our traveler's emergency kit for the winter journey, our assurance that God is present now, and will be there in the morning too. Its words, its stories, are food for the journey, companionship along the way. That is why the collect for today implores us to read the Holy Scriptures; "to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them," because

they empower us even in the depths of the winter journey to “embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life . . . given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.”

We are baptizing DTE this morning, making a new Christian. As much as his parents, and all of us, rightly want to protect him from hardship, the winter journey inevitably will be his lot someday. Indeed, T.S. Eliot again, says that commitment to the Way of the Cross is a journey that requires “not less than everything.” But the great Good News is that the Way of the Cross, shared by the community of the faithful and mapped by the Holy Scriptures, also provides not less than everything needful for the journey.

The “desolating sacrilege” never has the last word. Some of the most powerful words of Holy Scripture in fact promise that nothing can “separate us from the love of Christ: not distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword, nor death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation” (Romans 8: 35-39). Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Remember, the Magi found Jesus at the end of their winter journey. We find him all along the way in ours.

Amen.