

The Road Less Traveled – December 23, 2016

It's a Christmas tradition of sorts. But maybe one that we don't necessarily recognize at the time. We find ourselves driving to the store because we finally have to get the gift for Mom and Dad. We've been dreading it, putting it off. After all, what do you buy for the people who have everything? But we can't put it off any longer. So off to the mall we go, fighting the holiday traffic. And in the midst of the stress and the traffic, we find ourselves humming along to familiar tunes on the radio

*When I was a seeker
I sought both night and day
I asked the Lord to help me
And he showed me the way*

And the song continues with a burst of exuberance!

Go tell it on the mountain ...

And we find ourselves reflecting on this idea of searching and finding and sharing, and something warm flows through us.

Then we get to the mall, and it's a madhouse. People are coming and going, to and fro. The lines are long. The clerks are rude. The other shoppers are seemingly without any Christmas spirit. But we manage to find what we are looking for and finally get to leave the mall. And as we leave, we hear the voices of carolers floating across the parking lot.

O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant ...

As they become distant, our minds fill in the chorus
O come let us adore him ...

Simple adoration. How pure and refreshing it is.

Then we get home, and there is confusion there too. How are we going to get to three different parties in one day? There are last-minute gifts to wrap. What if the cousins stop by and we don't have gifts for them? How could we have already run out of tape? Then a child walks through room singing a song they learned in Sunday school

*Silent night
Holy night
All is calm
All is bright*

And the simple words about silence and peace slice through the stress and chaos.

It's the same struggle we face every year. We struggle to make it through the holiday season, to buy gifts, mail packages, attend parties, bake cookies, make the rounds to friends and family – all while keeping the reason for the season foremost in our mind. We decry the fact that Christmas has become too commercialized, but we do it while rushing to the next 40 percent off sale.

But the truth is that anxiety and stress – the fact that the secular keeps getting in the way of the divine -- is nothing new. After all, the days leading up to the first Christmas were not filled with quiet anticipation, but with a difficult journey. The journey was undertaken not to fulfill God's directive, but the requirement of the secular empire. Its motivation was not holy, but financial. And yet without that trip, the words of the prophets would have gone unfulfilled.

You can imagine that first Christmas Eve, filled not with peace and hot cocoa by the fire, but with Joseph, wild-eyed and panicked, running from house to house searching, begging for any square foot of space that was available for his wife to give birth, because surely a stable was not what God had in mind.

And yet, the joy and jubilation that the shepherds felt upon encountering the Christ child in the manger was dependent on Joseph's frantic and ultimately fruitless search. After all, the shepherds hardly would have been welcome had they knocked on the door of the inn and asked to see the new baby.

Even the Magi, who followed a star placed there by a God they didn't worship, followed that star to Jerusalem. But went on to Bethlehem at the direction of a secular king, who sent them not on a holy quest, but on an errand designed to help the king hold on to secular power.

What we find in the Christmas story is that over and over again, the world kept getting in the way, and God kept bringing everyone back to the reason for all the stress. In the end, the baby in the manger made all the stress and anxiety seem unimportant.

Today, more than 2,000 years later, the season is much the same. Our days are full and our blood pressures are elevated, our anxiety runs high. But God keeps finding ways to remind us of the reason for the season. This year is no different. We are once again players in the Christmas story. And we will no doubt be pulled in myriad directions. But the promise of Christmas is that the divine keeps bringing us back. And like those players so many years ago, we too will find God on Christmas morning.

Merry Christmas!