

“Life’s Journey of Discipleship”

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 2:13-15

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 11

The 12 days of Christmas are over; welcome to the first Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany was when the Wise Men elevated the baby Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior. Now that they’ve delivered their presents, they are heading back home. And with that, our Christmas observance is complete, the baby Jesus – the Christ child – has been welcomed into the world safe and sound. So where do we go from here?

When Joseph pondered this question, he got a message from an angel of the Lord telling him that things are not as safe and sound as one might think. “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” But Herod does not destroy Jesus! Herod is dead and Jesus is alive and so we too, are alive in Christ.

From now through Easter, we are going to learn what it means to be alive in Christ, as a disciple and follower of Jesus. Each of us, when we come to worship, can look for which aspect of discipleship, which spiritual practice, is being highlighted. And together, we will move into the New Year growing as disciples of Jesus.

To get us off on the right foot on this journey of discipleship, we’re going to spend some time this morning preparing for the first step, which we’ll take next week. Next week, we’ll look at what it means to Consent to Christ, to accept our calling to discipleship in Christ.

But for today, before we take that first step, let’s look at where Christ started out, how Jesus got his start. By starting with Jesus at the beginning of his earthly journey, we’ll learn something about our spiritual journey that will help us to grow as a follower of Christ.

There are two things to notice about the early life of Jesus, what little we know about it. First, when faced with danger to life and limb – and to his very being – Jesus retreats rather than attacks. He flees to Egypt. Now you’ll say he’s just a baby at this point, and that’s true. But even as a baby, Jesus is God incarnate. The baby Jesus embodied the power and spirit of the Lord. And instead of God standing up to Herod’s threats, it’s interesting to note that God retreats. He doesn’t send a plague upon Herod instead He sends the holy family into Egypt to sit this one out.

Did you know that it is in God's nature to retreat? It is, you know. In fact, that's what Jesus is all about it – God retreating, or more precisely, pulling back, withdrawing from or toning down the awesome power and unimaginable brilliance of the fullness of God's being. We just couldn't take it – seeing and experiencing the fullness of God.

So God accommodates himself to us, just like he did for Moses on Mount Sinai by appearing to him in a burning bush. And even that left the face of Moses shining with God's brightness and his hair white from the divine encounter.

We don't have to protect ourselves in our journey of discipleship. God will protect us. We don't have to force our way, God will guide us. We don't have to glorify ourselves; God will reward us and bless us.

The first thing to know about discipleship is that as much as it's about us becoming more like Christ, it is also about God coming closer to us, meeting us where we are, taking us by the hand, and bring us to a new place spiritually, a new way of being that blesses both us and others. Are you up for that kind of a journey? Alongside Jesus?

Pastor Mike Yaconelli used to tell a story about a deacon who hadn't quite gotten the whole deacon-thing down when he first started.¹ He just didn't do what he was calling him to do as a deacon. One day, Yaconelli said to him, "I have a group of young people who go to the old folks home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the old folks home, and at least do that?" The deacon agreed. The first Sunday the deacon was at the nursing home, he stood in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down, and here was this old man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the old man's hand and the old man held his hand all during the service. The next month this was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon, ... the next month, the next month, and the next month. Then the old man wasn't there. One of the health workers told the deacon, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray... that's all right." The deacon went and there were tubes and wires hanging out all over the place. He took the man's hand. He prayed that God would receive him, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings. As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks. He stumbled out of the room and as he did so, he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time." The deacon was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. 'He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.'"

¹ As told by Tony Campolo

That's the second thing we learn about the journey of discipleship. If we give ourselves over to it – even in spite of ourselves – particularly in spite of ourselves – God takes us to new and wonderful places, spiritually, even if the place we are physically is a nursing home as a reluctant visitor.

Of course, this isn't about our deacons, or visiting nursing homes. It's about any one of us, what God is calling you to as a follower of Christ. That's what we're going to focus on as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, between now and Easter.

By looking at who Jesus reveals himself to be, we can get direction and inspiration to become who God is calling us to be. Because let's face it, we don't always know what God desires of us along our individual journeys of discipleship, unless we look, and listen, to God's word, as embodied in Jesus Christ. Jesus and the holy family didn't know what to expect in Egypt.

We don't even know what Jesus encountered there. But we do know who he was when he returned – the embodiment of God's will for him and for all humanity demanding justice for the least of God's children, coming alongside us in prayer, inspiring us to give to those in need, leading us in our growth spiritually and in our knowledge of God, hearing our prayers and answering them, delighting in our worship, bringing us together as the body of Christ, and sending us out to becoming disciples of Jesus and to lead others along that path.

That's what the life of discipleship is all about. That's what we'll be moving through in the months ahead. You can get a handout from one of the ushers or pick one up from the Credenza. It lists all these aspects of Christian Discipleship, as well as the Sunday scripture we'll focus on as we look at each of them.

And don't let yourself be overwhelmed by this list of Discipleship Practices, because while it's true that such encounters with God do change us, these changes are typically small and they come gradually over time.

That's what being a follower of Christ is – taking small, gradual steps along life's journey of discipleship. So let's do that together, shall we – consciously focus on our own individual place as a follower of Christ, where you are right now, and where God would lead you.

I invite you to make that your New Year's resolution – to develop or reflect upon some concrete ways that you can or are engaging your faith as a disciple, as a follower of Jesus.

Let's do that together between now and Easter. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Protective God, you sent your son Jesus into Egypt so that he might live and grow, and tell of your love for humanity.

Send us wherever your will leads, so that others may know, through us, the glory of your love.

Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God's will, teaching us to be disciples of Christ who seek justice for the oppressed, turn to God in prayer, give to those in need, and apply God's word to our lives that we might grow spiritually in the body of Christ.

As followers of Jesus, we trust in God to answer our prayers, enliven our worship, unite us in Christ, and send us out to bring others to the path of discipleship.

As Christ's faithful disciples, we pray for those who do not yet know the love of Jesus, the healing touch of God, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Help us to be a light unto their path.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, the one whom we embrace as our Lord and Savior, and who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**