

## **An Invitation To Journey**

(Genesis 32:1-2, 24-31; I Kings 19:1-9; Acts 9:1-7; Luke 24:13-32)

An emperor penguin jumps out of the water, landing on his belly on the ice. Then he gets up on his little web feet, as the voice of the narrator says, "Like most love stories, it begins with an act of utter foolishness. Each year at about the same time, the emperor penguin will leave the comforts of his ocean home and embark on an incredible journey. Though he is a bird, he won't fly. Though he lives in the ocean, he won't swim. For the most part, he will walk. But he won't walk alone." Slowly, the screen fills with hundreds of penguins, walking along on their little feet, traveling past ice formations under a beautiful blue sky. As the movie March of The Penguins explains, the destination of the emperor penguins is always the same, even though the paths they take may vary because of shifting ice formations.

Our God wants us to know that we too have been created for journeying. The imagery of physical journeying is found throughout our Bibles, and it's obviously symbolic of the spiritual journeying God expects of us.

In Genesis, "the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.'" Because Abraham believed and trusted God, he left behind his former way of living and traveled forth in faith. The story of Abraham's physical journeying from Mesopotamia to Canaan to Egypt to Canaan is really symbolic of his spiritual journeying closer and closer to the God who had called to him.

The story of the Exodus is similar. It was during their wandering in the wilderness for 40 years that the Israelites grew close enough to God to enter his Promised Land.

And it was while Jacob was journeying that he had such a personal encounter with God that he wrestled with God. And God was not angry but rather was pleased that Jacob wrestled with him, for God blessed Jacob afterward. Symbolically, this story tells us that on our journeying, God encourages us to question him, to interact with him, to be humble enough to know that God has what we need to survive.

We find this same theme of encountering God on a journey and interacting with him in the story of Elijah. Elijah got to the point where he didn't want to go any further on his journeying with God. The story says he was hiding out under a broom tree. In other words, Elijah had stopped his traveling--he wasn't going to go any further on his God-journey. He felt he'd done enough--gone far enough. But God spoke to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Two times, God asked Elijah why he was hiding out under a broom tree, when he should have been on the road. So finally, Elijah resumed his journey, going farther, where God wanted him to go, journeying closer to becoming the person God had called him to become.

In Jesus' himself, we find the same theme. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he began to travel the road that would lead him ever closer to God and living his life as God intended. Thus Jesus allowed God's Spirit to drive him into the wilderness, and it was on this 40-day journey that Jesus confronted temptation and found the courage and strength and wisdom to take the road God wanted him to take from that point on. Some of his journeying led him to Samaria. In other words, as Jesus traveled with God, his journey took him to people others looked down upon but whom he came to accept and to love. Jesus' journeying took him to sinners whom he soon forgave. In his journey he encountered Pharisees and thus saw the evil in choosing traditions and public opinion over love. In his journeying, Jesus interacted with people but also spent lots of one-on-one time with God. When Peter, James, and John witnessed one especially holy moment with Jesus one day on a mountain, they wanted to make a booth and stay there. But Jesus knew that, as in the story of Elijah, he was called to travel on. He set his face toward journeying toward Jerusalem.

And in the course of his traveling, Jesus got all sorts of others traveling toward God's kingdom too. Jesus got his disciples on the road leading to God by simply saying, "follow me." He got a blind man named Bartimaeus on the road to God by healing his poor vision. Soon, Bartimaeus, as scripture says, "followed him on the way" (Mark 10:52).

Ah, and how could we forget the story of the two people traveling on the road to Emmaus? While Cleopas and his companion were traveling, they encountered the Risen Lord, interacted with him, listened to him, stayed

with him, and as a result found their "hearts burning within" them and were transformed.

Then there was the Pharisee Saul, who was so certain that he was on the only road to God that he was killing those who weren't traveling the same road to God that he traveled. But one day when he was traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus, to arrest more followers of Jesus, he encountered the Risen Jesus. Saul was literally stopped in his tracks and afterward changed directions.

No wonder the followers of the Risen Lord were first known as "followers of the Way." They considered themselves followers of the way Jesus lived and followers of the way Jesus pointed out as the way to God's kingdom.

So, you see, it's no mere coincidence that so many of the stories in our Bibles have to do with journeying. In and through these stories on the pages of our Bibles, our God is extending an invitation to us to make our lives a journey as well. God never forces himself on us, but he offers us an invitation to journey.

So the first thing we need to do is think about the difference accepting God's invitation will make in our lives. Back in the 1960's a movie came out that became an American classic. In "The Graduate," Dustin Hoffman starred as a young college student who couldn't decide what to do with his life. In an early scene in the movie, he's floating on a rubber raft in a swimming pool, when his father comes out and asks, "What are you doing?" And he replies, "Drifting. Just drifting." Left on our own, without God in our lives, we drift through life, until one day we realize how empty we feel. We then begin to ask, "Is this all there is to life? Is there no meaning? No purpose?" Accepting God's invitation to journey toward his kingdom gives our lives direction, purpose, meaning, and joy.

Once we realize that we want to accept God's invitation to journey, the second thing we need to do is just get on the road! Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, was a millionaire by the time he was twenty-nine. He could buy his wife anything she wanted; however, he came home one day to find that she left him. When he found her in a hotel in New York City, she poured out her heart to him. She told him that she wasn't

interested in the expensive gifts he had been buying her. She said that her heart was empty and her spirit was burned out. She said that she felt dead inside and wanted to live again. Thus, Millard and Linda knelt down in prayer and then made a radical decision. They decided to get on the road to a life of purpose--to get on the road to God's kingdom. They decided to sell everything they had and dedicate themselves to serving poor people and to working for justice for the oppressed. The next day, being Sunday, Millard and Linda got up and found a church so that they could worship God and ask for his guidance along the new road they would be traveling. Since they got to the church early, they spoke to the minister about their decision. In Millard's own words: "He told us that it was not necessary for us to give up everything. He just didn't understand that we weren't giving up money and the things that money could buy. We were giving up a whole way of life that was killing us." Like the Fullers, we have to decide to make our lives a journey toward God's kingdom.

Third, it's important to constantly check to be sure we're still headed in the right direction--toward God's kingdom. It's easy to get off-course. I remember reading about a man who was a salesman for the Dow Chemical Company. His sales route was in South Louisiana where there were a lot of good fishing holes. So he always kept a rod and reel in the trunk of his car--just in case a good fishing hole popped up between sales calls. One day the man was driving down a road when he saw an unusual looking fishing hole. So he pulled his car over, got his rod and reel, and began to cast. He was amazed, though, that he wasn't getting any bites. Before too long, an old Cajun who was working in the area came over and just stood there watching the salesman fish. Just kept looking at him. Finally, to break the tension, the salesman said, "I haven't had a bite." The Cajun didn't smile. He just looked at the salesman and said, "Well, son, you ain't gonna catch no fish. That's a sewage treatment pond." We need to constantly check out where we are--to be sure we're still on a road that will lead us to God's kingdom. And we can do this by constantly comparing the way we're living our lives with the way Jesus lived his life in the gospels.

Fourth, it's important to keep going. At times the road may get difficult. We can get ambushed by all sorts of things. Selfishness, busyness, fear, despair, disappointment, disrupted plans, unrealized dreams, pain, grief--they all seem to hide out and then ambush us as we travel on toward God's

kingdom. They make us, like Elijah, want to stop our journeys and hide out in a cave. But if we listen, we hear God asking us, "What are you doing here? Get back on the road."

Fifth, it's important that we be open to meeting new people, being challenged, asking questions, learning, growing, stretching, changing, being transformed as we travel toward God's kingdom. In today's *Living The Questions* class, which I hope all of you will attend, theologian John Spong says, "The episode in Genesis of Jacob wrestling with God should be lifted high. I've had to come out of all kinds of certainties that were 'killing certainties' (such as when the church preached that blacks and women weren't equal to white men). When you look at the history of the church, the times when we were certain were also the times when we persecuted people. It's when we burned people at the stake. That's when we had religious wars. I think certainty is a vice in religion--one of the things we ought to rid ourselves of. So I would constantly want to hold this wrestling, this uncomfortable, this I-don't-have-it-together, we're-struggling-in-this-together as the proper image for the Christian faith. We walk into the mystery of God. We never arrive, and if we think we arrive, we become an idolater....The people who think they've arrived are the ones who always get us in trouble."

Another theologian in today's class, Nancy Ammerman, stresses that on our journeys, we each have our own unique experiences of or encounters with God--even though we are all oriented in the same direction toward God's kingdom.

But, as The March of The Penguins points out, like most love stories, it all begins with an act of utter foolishness. Leaving your home in Mesopotamia, journeying you know not exactly where, journeying in faith. Turning your back on a fortune at the age of 29 so that you can help others--coincidentally, so that you can help yourself. You embark on the journey knowing that you won't walk alone. God will be there, helping you resist temptation in the wilderness, showing you new people to love in Samaria, healing your vision so you can find your way, asking you what you think you're doing when you try to hide. God will be there, blessing you when you care so much that you ask questions and wrestle with him, pleased with your humility

in knowing that you don't have all the answers. God will be there, making your heart burn within you as he brings about transformation in your life.

Friends, God extends to us the same invitation he extended to Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jesus, the disciples, Bartimaeus, Cleopas, and Saul. May we humbly and gratefully accept God's gracious invitation to journey. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; September 20, 2009