Sunday, February 16, 1986
THE JOURNEY AWAY FROM HOME (No. 1 in a Series: On the Road with Jesus)
Luke 4:1-13

Good metaphors are not easy to find, but when we find an appropriate one, it can be a tremendous aid in our understanding. It gives us a framework or a pattern for interpretation. To think of life as a journey is such a metaphor. When an individual is born into this world, he or she is beginning a journey, a journey through life and a journey through time. We have our outward journeys as we grow and continue to mature and our inward journeys.

During this season of Lent, we are going to be looking at our own life's journey by looking at the journeys of Jesus. We are going to be "on the road with Jesus" as he leaves his home, as he travels from Nazareth to Jericho, back to Nazareth, to Capernaum, to Jerusalem, to Bethany, and back to Jerusalem during Holy Week and finally to his death and resurrection. We will meet some of the people that Jesus met along the way, encounter some of his difficulties and successes. We will also travel with him in his spiritual journey which is as important as his outward journeys, and this will give us a chance to examine our own spiritual journeys.

All journeys have a number of things in common. They are not always smooth. There are delays, stops and starts, unexpected events and other surprises. Most of us take along some necessary baggage and at times excess baggage. In fact, good advice for any journey is to travel light — don't take too much baggage. This is also good advice for our life's journey. Here's a story about excess baggage:

In his latest book, "Take Bus 9 to Paradise: A Loving Voyage," Leo Buscaglia tells about sitting with a despondent friend whose husband had left her with the casualness of one taking off on a holiday cruise. He was hoping that he could still have a friendship with his wife and, of course, unlimited visiting privileges with his children. His wife had other ideas. She was bitter, hurt, and vindictive. He had shattered her self-esteem and broken up the family. In no way was she about to maintain a friendship with him. In fact, she was quick to call him a rodent and use several expletives Buscaglia had never heard her use before.

She turned to Buscaglia for help. She couldn't seem to stop crying. She'd lost interest in her home and her children. Though she continued to work, she found that always being so upset and distracted caused her to be negative in her interactions with others. She snapped at friends, became impatient with co-workers in the office, and found herself shouting at the children. She continued to find endless reasons for hating her ex-husband, but she also began to hate herself in the process. She was filled with regrets and self-recriminations. She was certain that if she had done more for him — made herself more attractive, kept a better home — she wouldn't have lost him and the children would still have a father.

Buscaglia says it was difficult for him to help her. No amount of tears or regrets were going to bring back her husband or revitalize the dead marriage. There was no easy solution. Damaged self-esteem takes a long time to heal. She could not, however, continue in her present state. Despair was already taking its toll. Of course, there were many things she could do. She could finally face the fact that life's journey does go on. She was still young, attractive, and capable. So Buscaglia suggested that she might accept the situation, forgive her husband for his actions and herself for whatever part she might have unconsciously played in his decision, and then continue on her own life's journey.

Much of her pain was based on the fact that she was taking responsibility for her husband's acts. But she said, "Forgive him? Are you crazy? I'd die first. I'll find a way someday to get even with him. I'll find a way to hurt him like he hurt me." She refused to let go of her anger and hate.

Her husband was off celebrating a new life with new possibilities and a new person, none of which she had any control over. She, on the other hand, was drowning in despair. Most of us have learned from experience that not to forgive hurts us more than anyone else. Grudges are part of that excess baggage we carry on our life's journey and they weigh us down and continue to create bitterness and suspicion and despair. There are some things that need to be left behind on our life's journey.

Now let's begin to look at the journey of Jesus. One of Jesus' first major steps in his journey, as in ours, was that of leaving home. It begins in a number of small ways. We begin to leave home when we begin to think of ourselves. We begin to leave home when we have secrets from our parents and when we want to be alone. It's all part of growing up and being a part of the journey of life.

In our time, it also begins when a child goes to a daycare center, or later to a preschool, and then to kindergarten, first grade, and through elementary school and high school and college. No moment in the life of a parent is more awesome than when a child begins to leave home physically for the first time, and as you watch them walk away, you wonder: "Have I prepared this one adequately for all he or she will face?"

Jesus undoubtedly went to a synagogue school and his parents had the same doubts, thoughts, and fears as do all parents. Later when he was twelve, they took him to Jerusalem and he stayed behind for a few days without their consent or knowledge. Like all of us, Jesus began early to learn things from others as well as his parents. That too is part of leaving home on our life's journey.

In our time, going away to college is another major leaving home event, especially when one goes to a university or college geographically away from home. I remember the knot in my stomach each time we left one of our children in the college dormitory for the first time and Rowena and I drove home alone. Nothing is the same after that. And then if one's child gets married, that's another kind of leaving home.

The point is that we all begin leaving home in many little ways at a very early age and it's part of the parent's job to help and guide this process along. It's a necessary part of life's journey. And there are always things to be left behind.

The New Testament indicates that Jesus was about 30 years old when he physically left home. We are not told in the Bible how certain Jesus was about his mission in life at the time. We don't know where he was in his spiritual journey. We do know that he had been brought up as a faithful Jew; that he knew the books of the Old Testament quite well, and that he took his religious faith seriously.

At the same time, like most young people, then and now, he had struggled with such questions as: Should he remain in Nazareth and make his living in his father's business as a carpenter? Oral tradition holds that Joseph died when Jesus himself was nineteen years old. We are led

to think that Jesus then assumed responsibility for the support of his mother and his brothers and sisters until they could make it on their own.

So it is that in our life's journey, we are sometimes held back for a time because of circumstances beyond our control. Our life's journeys do not always go according to our own schedule. There are starts and stops, hills and valleys.

Jesus was like all of us in that as he grew up, there were a number of influences that entered his life — some that his parents agreed with, and perhaps some they did not agree with. He was also influenced by his parents and by the rabbis who taught him. Then John the Baptist appeared as a new prophet declaring that the promised Kingdom of God was close at hand. The message reached Jerusalem but also was heard as far away as the towns in rustic Galilee, including Jesus' hometown of Nazareth.

Jesus was attracted to this new message. Some biblical scholars suggest that Jesus left his hometown and his family and trade in order to join the religious community led by John the Baptist. He detected in the message of John something that appealed to his deepest religious feelings. Certainly, Jesus had his own ideas about what was lacking in the Jewish religion as it was administered by the priests and the Pharisees in Jerusalem. It was spiritual hunger that led him on his journey, and it is not at all certain that his decision to leave home and family won their amiable consent.

It is spiritual hunger that often leads us on our life's journey as well. We are looking for something more in life than we can get simply by staying home. And like Jesus and his family, in our time, some of the biggest difficulties we face in our life's journey have to do with what our family thinks we should do and what we think we should do. Yet in the final analysis, each of us has to decide the direction of his or her life's journey.

Thus, leaving home is not always easy. It can be made easier, however, when those at home help to prepare us for our own life's journey, and this is done with the proper kind of love. When we are loved in the right way, the people who love us want us to be what we are, not what they are. They rejoice in the fact that we are growing with our ideas, our dreams, our uniqueness, our future. They want us to be independent and free, not submissive and afraid. They encourage risk because they understand that by risking, we continue to grow.

Soon after leaving home, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, and it was one of many religious high points in his life. It gave him a new sense of self-identity and a new sense of direction for his journey. It was a road marker on his journey.

But God never lays out the complete journey for us to see ahead of time. God may know where the journey is going to lead us, but we do not. All we can know is that God is with us and gently leading us and sometimes carrying us. The journey of life is therefore not like some other trips we take where we can plan out the itinerary in great detail ahead of time and stick to it exactly. We may plan our life's journey very carefully, but then we find along the way detours, holding patterns, and even changes of destination.

And our journeys are not without their temptations. This is what Jesus quickly discovered. Following the high religious experience of baptism and of hearing God speak to him in a new way, Jesus entered a period of intense struggle, temptation, and doubt. What direction should his life take now? How should he use God's power that he had so intensely experienced? How should he use the gifts that God had given him?

Among other things, he was tempted to be the kind of leader who would try to satisfy all the material wants of his people. The second temptation followed naturally — by so doing he could quickly obtain many followers and if he played his hand right, could become a very powerful political leader — maybe even rule the world. And then the most subtle temptation of all — test God to see if God was truly with him.

So in summary, what does the beginning of Jesus' journey have to say to us about our own life's journeys?

Although our journeys through life vary, we have to leave home at some time or another and begin our own journey, and that is not always easy to do. Those of us who are parents can help that happen with the right kind of love.

Decide what is necessary baggage for the journey and what is excess baggage. Some people leave home and carry the excess baggage of earlier conflicts with their parents or others with them, and the load is too heavy to carry. We continue to pick up excess baggage throughout life, and therefore throughout life, we need to let it go. If we continue to travel an inward spiritual journey, then it's easier to sort out the excess baggage from the necessary baggage.

On our journey, we have to be continually deciding how we are going to use the gifts that God has given us. There are course corrections that continually need to be made along the way.

I have always liked the story that Rabbi Joseph Liebermann tells of dreaming one night that he had died and stood before the Judge of all creation. In the dream, he was not asked, "Why weren't you Moses or Jacob or David or Solomon?" He was rather asked, "Why weren't you Rabbi Liebermann?" This is the highest challenge on the journey of life — to let our particular light shine, no matter what others may want or need so that the world may see what God has created and give glory to God.

Jesus' journey through life was guided by that challenge, as ours should be. He lived it day by day. He was certainly no stranger to the pressure of having other people wanting him to be and do certain things.

Like Rabbi Liebermann, I think that the one question I shall be asked at my journey's end will be, "What did you do with the gifts I gave you at birth and throughout your life as you continued to grow and mature?" God will not ask me, "Why weren't you Billy Graham or Robert Schuller or anyone else?"

I like what one very successful business and political leader said to me one day in his own words about the journey of life. "Otis, I think I've got it just about figured out what God is going to ask each one of us at the end of this life's journey — there will be two questions — first God will ask, 'What have you done with all I've given you?' That's the easy one. And the second is tougher, 'Who did you do it for?'"

Think about those questions as you continue in your own life's journey. Amen.