Book 30

Sunday April 9, 1995

JOURNEY TO TRIUMPH Luke 19:28-40

It's been very helpful for me as a human being and as a follower of the Christian way to think of life on this earth as a journey. In the use of this metaphor, it's also been very beneficial for me to understand God's Holy Spirit as revealed most completely in Jesus as my primary guide on my life's journey.

As with all journeys, as I try to follow God's leading, there are mountaintop highs and valleys of doubt and despair. No journey is completely smooth from beginning to end.

Sometimes on my life's journey, there are holding patterns and stopping places that I hadn't planned on and I simply have to be patient and wait.

There are times when I feel lost and have to search or wait

for new directions. And there are detours in my journey that I hadn't expected and I find myself in some surprising and wonderful places. Furthermore in my life's journey as in yours, I sometimes encounter traveling conditions over which I have little control.

I've also discovered as I continue to travel life's journey that I tend to acquire things along the way so that I need to be continually deciding what is necessary baggage and what is excess baggage. There is the excess baggage of earlier conflicts that will never be resolved, and the unnecessary baggage of grudges, mistakes, old fears and anxieties that should've been left behind long ago. This kind of baggage is heavy and takes a lot of energy to carry. It needs to be discarded.

At the same time, my necessary baggage includes taking with me a continual supply of unconditional love, suitcases filled with forgive-

ness, and other luggage overflowing with an openness to new ideas and new experiences. I also need to carry with me the desire to grow and mature and the expectation that I will find God in unexpected places. And the amazing thing is that this kind of baggage is never heavy and is easy to carry and my supply can be easily replenished as I travel life's journey. In fact the more love and forgiveness that I give away as I travel, the more there is available.

I not only need God's Spirit as my guide and traveling companion but I continue to discover

that the life journey of Jesus as he lived among us is instructive.

No journey in life need ever be taken alone. There are always friends which are a big help. Some have traveled with me most of the way, others I meet on my journey and they have traveled with me for a time and then they need to go their own way. As I look back on my life's journey, I can see that there have been friends along the way that have frequently made all the difference in the world. There are friends who have helped to turn sadness into joy and despair into hope.

There are friends who have helped me change directions and friends who have carried me when I stumbled. There are friends and sometimes enemies who have educated me and corrected me. Furthermore it's more fun to travel life's journey with others than to travel alone.

Some parts of life's my journey have been festive and filled with celebration, while others have been sad and lacking in hope. I'm sure your journey has been the same.

Today I invite you to travel with me as we acccompany Jesus on the last segment of his

life's journey and although this trip to Jerusalem led in the end to his arrest, trial and crucifixion, it also ended with his resurrection so it was above all a journey to triumph.

We all have our favorite trips. Perhaps it's the journey at Christmas or on some other special occasion back to the place we came from. Or maybe it's a trip to a certain vacation spot that we have gone to year after year. For many of the people in Jesus' time, it was to go to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover Feast, one of the most important holidays in the Jewish calendar.

To truly celebrate it, people wantaed to be in Jerusalem, in the same way as to truly experience the Mardi Gras, one needs to be in New Orleans.

It's a long trip on foot as we travel with Jesus and his disciples. The eighty-mile journey takes us along the Jordan River valley to sunny Jericho, the last stopping place for pilgrims from the north country who travel to Jersusalem for the religious festivals.

Since Jericho is 825 feet below sea level near the Dead Sea, while Jerusalem is perched on the hilly backbone of Palestine some 2500 feet

above sea level, Jesus' statement about going up to Jerusalem is quite literally true.

As we travel along, the roads leading up to Jerusalem are crowded as many faithful people want to be there for the Passover. It's like the roads leading to Lincoln on the Saturday of a home football game.

Jesus and his disciples are heading for one of the eastern suburbs of Jerusalem, a little town called Bethany, which will be their stopping place and a place to stay for the coming week. There are several important reasons for staying here rather than in the city. For one thing

finding accommodations in the Holy City would be difficult because of the many travelers wanting places to stay.

Jesus also has close friends in Bethany and he can stay with them. It's only about a half hour's walk from this village into the city.

Upon arriving in Bethany, Jesus and his disciples were the guests of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. A dinner party was given in his honor. It was during that evening that Mary used the whole bottle of her most expensive perfume to annoint the feet of Jesus which

caused Judas and some of the other people present to complain about the waste of it all. Then on early Sunday morning, on what today we still call Palm Sunday, Jesus and his disciples made their way into the Holy City.

If you were listening closely to the story of this day as told by the Gospel according to Luke, you perhaps noticed that in his account there's no reason to call today Palm Sunday. Luke says nothing about people waving palms or any kind of branches from trees. All he reports is that as Jesus rode along, his followers kept spreading their cloaks or coats on the road.

Maybe we could call it "cloak or coat" Sunday.

As best we can determine from what all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have to say about what happened, some kind of spontaneous demonstration developed along the way as Jesus rode on a donkey into Jerusalem. Luke implies that the cheers from the people came only from his followers and not from the general crowds which were in the city for the festival.

In this version of the story these are not the people who later turn cold and shout that Jesus should be crucified. His disciples did not fully understand his messiahship, to be sure,

but neither are they persons who sing praise and scream death the same week.

Not only does Luke not mention palm branches as do the other gospels, he also does not describe the crowds as shouting hosanna or have their songs of praise make reference to David the former King of Israel and try to connect Jesus with him. Those kinds of things belong to parades and festivals with nationalistic overtones and Luke remembers this event as having no such implications.

But what did it all mean for Jesus in his life's journey and what does it mean for us today in our journey?

1. First of all, even though some of his critics asked Jesus to quiet down his followers, he refused to do so. He said, "I tell you if these were silent, the stones would shout out." Jesus knew that even though some of the enthusiasm for his ministry might be misplaced, this was not the time to try to correct it. That's also why Jesus refused to be critical of Mary when she poured out all of her expensive perfume to annoint him.

There are times in all of our lives when festivity and celebration should not be silenced even though we who are engaging in them may be partially mistaken in our understanding of the event.

In our journey through life we all need times of festivity and celebration. The Jewish faith and our Christian faith are filled with festivals and celebrations. It's one way of expressing our joy in God's good creation.

One definition of festivity is this: "Festivity is a socially approved occasion for the expression

of feelings that are normally repressed or neglected."

All festivals, including religious ones, have several essential ingredients. One of these is conscious excess. We "overdue it" on purpose. We break from our normal routine. We stay up later than usual; we shout louder; we eat more; we let ourselves go. Perhaps we laugh or cry or both. Sometimes we wear things that would be stared at curiously or be considered odd on most occasions. Think of some of the unusual red outfits worn on home football Saturdays.

The point is, festivity provides a short vacation from convention. So it was that on Palm Sunday, the people in a mood of celebration threw their garments on the road. They were excessive in their enthusiasm.

Festivity is a way of saying "yes" to life. Jesus was described by his critics as being a winebibber and a glutton. He enjoyed parties and festivals.

Life is filled with a variety of celebrations. Sometimes we celebrate because of something that has happened, like a new job, or a graduation, or we might gather together to express our hope for something to happen. A

memorial service for an individual who has died and has lived a useful and loving life can be a celebration in the midst of our sadness and loss. In fact, the ability to celebrate with real abandon is often found among people who are no strangers to pain and oppression. It's no accident that some of the most meaningful and joyful parties are to be found among poor people.

Jesus knew that festivity and the joy which accompanies it is not only worthwhile in itself, it is absolutely vital to human life. Festivals help us to relate ourselves to the past. They enable us to appreciate and enjoy the present

and they give us hope for the future. Festivals are a way of remembering and reclaiming our life's story. They are important stopping places in our life's journey.

The festival, the special time when ordinary chores are set aside while we celebrate some event, affirms the sheer goodness of what is. And festivals, both religious ones and many secular ones, help us incorporate into our own lives the joys of other people and the experience of previous generations; the past, the present and the future are all connected.

In addition, festivals make us more aware of our connections with each other. They bind us together. Have you ever tried to celebrate some important occasion all by yourself? Who wants to be alone on Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter or on one's birthday, or on the 4th of July? In a time of festivity, we want to be and need to be with others. Otherwise it does not seem like much of a celebration.

Jesus knew that one's journey through life would be dull without festivity and celebrations. That's why it's so universal in life. We human beings are by nature of God's creation, crea-

tures who not only work and think and sleep,

but we are people who sing, dance, tell stories and celebrate.

No culture or religion is without it. African pygmies and Australian primitives frolic in honor of the equinox. Hindus revel at Holi. Moslems feast after the long fast of Ramadan. In some societies, the principal festival comes at harvest or when the moon reaches a particular position. In others, the anniversary of some event in the life of the culture or nation supplies the cause for jubilation. All provide an occasion for singing old songs, saluting heroes and heroines and reaffirming new and old aspirations. When festivity disappears

from a culture, something universally human and holy is lost.

2. Secondly, Jesus knew that all of us need festivity in our life's journey because it helps keep us aware of our connection with God. The person who can celebrate is one who understands his or her life within a larger historical and cosmic setting. Festivity with its songs, ritual and story connect us to our history. It places us somewhere between the beginning of creation and the end of history.

For Jesus and his first disciples with their Jewish heritage, the festival of the Passover re-

called their history, the freedom from slavery in Egypt and it reminded them of God's continued presence with them through history. It helped them to remember who they where, where they came from and therefore gave them hope for the future.

There are celebrations in our life's journey which are so important that as Jesus said, if we were to keep quiet, the very stones would cry out. It's another way of saying that God's truth will always be heard. It cannot be stopped.

So in my journey through life and in yours, let us not neglect festivity and celebration. Such things are God's gifts to us. Amen.