Sunday, January 10, 1999
STEPS ON LIFE'S JOURNEY
Matthew 3:13-17

Sometimes I find myself wondering about strange things. Does the cow grazing in the field know she is a cow? Or is self-consciousness something that only human beings possess? I've also wondered, as you have, why is there so much evil in the world? Conversely, I've wondered, why is there so much good in the world?

Carl Sagan, the renowned scientist, once said to a theologian friend, "You're so smart, why do you believe in God?" The theologian then asked him, "You're so smart, why don't you believe in God?"

One day, a young man said to Harry Emerson Fosdick, "I don't believe in God." Fosdick, in turn, asked him a question: "What kind of God don't you believe in?" These questions led to more discussion, allowing Fosdick to say to the young man, "I don't believe in that kind of God either."

I also wonder, especially at this time of year, why all kinds of news reporters and editors try to choose and list the biggest or most important news stories of the previous year? What difference does it make anyway?

On a more serious note, I find myself wondering about God and the way God is experienced in our personal lives and in the world at large. I also wonder why some individuals have a deep and growing faith in God despite extreme difficulties, while others struggle to find faith.

When Benjamin Hirsch was six years old, he experienced such a hideous event that he blocked it out. He had to piece together the story from what he had been told by his relatives. The event took place on Kristallnacht. A group of Nazis came to his parents' house in Frankfurt, Germany, and demanded to see Hirsch's father. Hirsch's mother came to the door holding one of her babies. She told the men, "Dr. Hirsch is not in, but I would be happy to have him call you as soon as he gets back."

One of the men grabbed the baby from its mother's arms and threw it on the floor. He pulled out his pistol and pointed it at the baby. "You have thirty seconds to produce Dr. Hirsch," the man said. "If he doesn't come out, I'll shoot the baby first, then all the other children by age. One by one you will see all of your children die." Hirsch's father had been hiding and listening in the back of the house. He ran out to his children and was arrested. That was the last time Hirsch saw his father.

After his father was arrested in 1938, Hirsch's mother sent him and his two older brothers and sisters on a kindertransport to Paris. There, the children were split up. His siblings were paired according to gender and stayed with different relatives, while he stayed with people who were not relatives. Hirsch then lived in several children's homes throughout France until 1941, when he came to the United States via an escape route through Spain and Portugal. Both of Hirsch's parents eventually died in concentration camps, as well as a younger brother and sister.

Despite all that he has been through, Hirsch has a strong faith in God. Listen to some of his own words: "I don't understand many things that happen. I am troubled by many events, but I feel God's presence in the good and in the bad. My understanding of God is that God is not

limited by what we, as human beings, are limited by. Our limits of knowledge, our physical limits, and our intellectual limits are not comparable to God's."

Today, Hirsch is an architect in Atlanta, Georgia, who designs and builds synagogues and churches, and he says that in his work he feels God's direction.

If you read Benjamin Hirsch's story in its entirety, it is a spiritual journey with many different steps along the way. Many of those steps involved pain and loss, yet like many of us and like Jesus, Hirsch sensed a mysterious stirring within him. It is a stirring that tells him and us that something larger than ourselves is at work, that something is filling our spirits and inspiring us to press on.

We will never be able to understand a gun pointed at an infant's head, the loss and cruelty experienced during the Holocaust, but like Hirsch, we may be able to understand — in hindsight, or sometimes as it is happening — that God is present in our blessings and in our trials.

Maintaining a strong relationship with God and God's goodness does not always come easy. I remember a phone call I received from a young man. He called me at home one evening and said that he was having a difficult time with his faith in God, especially in God's goodness. He said he wanted very much to believe, and sometimes he felt very close to God. But at other times, when he thought of all the pain and suffering in the world and in his own life, he concluded that his faith in God and God's goodness didn't make much sense. I told him that I was familiar with his experience. I, too, wonder why there is so much evil and suffering in the world, and as I said earlier, I also wonder why there is so much good in the world.

What most of us want to discover and experience, like the young man who telephoned me and like Benjamin Hirsch, is a growing relationship with God. We want the assurance that we are good, that God is good, and that life is good.

The young man who called me said he could recite all the classical arguments for the existence of God, but he wanted more than rational explanations. He wanted the kind of experience that let him know, in the deep spaces of his soul, that God is good and God's love is constant even when his head tells him that there's a lot wrong in the world. I asked the young man to give me some examples of the kind of relationship with God that he desired. He said something like this: "When I can feel and know that I am loved while everything around me seems to say that I am unlovable, then I know I am connected to God. When I experience gratitude enough to make me glad, then I know that God's Spirit is alive in me." He went on to say, "I know it is the testimony of the Christian faith that God's Spirit is present within us at our birth and can be discovered and experienced in bad times and in good, in sorrow and in joy, but why does it seem to come and go?"

I said to the young man that he was asking the right questions. He had used the words "discover" and "experience" God's Spirit. He was not talking about achievement. He knew that one's relationship with God is not strengthened by trying harder. Rather, it's a matter of being open to God's Spirit and allowing that power to work in our lives.

Here's a story that has been very helpful to me over the years. Many years ago, there lived in Cracow, Poland, a Rabbi named Eisik, who dreamed three times that there was a treasure buried beneath a particular bridge in the City of Prague.

After the third dream, Eisik finally walked the long distance to Prague. When he found the bridge, the captain of the soldiers who were guarding the bridge asked him why he had come. Eisik told him about his three dreams. The captain said that if he had faith in dreams, he would have gone to Cracow a long time ago when he dreamed that there was a treasure buried in the ground under the stove of a Jew named Eisik.

When Rabbi Eisik heard this, he left immediately, walked the long journey home, and dug up the treasure under his kitchen stove.

This story, which dates back to the 8th century, is about all of us. We tend to think the treasure we've been looking for is somewhere else when, all the time, it is under the kitchen stove at home. Or we think the treasure is something to be achieved by our own effort.

There are people who look all over the world in exotic places and strange religious movements but miss the Spirit of God at home in their everyday lives and ordinary commonplace experiences. Remember, Jesus said, "The Spirit of God is in the midst of you, within you, and among you." The Apostle Paul said, "God is not far from any one of us, for in God we live and move and have our being."

It is precisely here that the life and teachings of Jesus can be of immense help. As Marcus Borg points out in his book Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, Jesus was first and foremost a "spirit person," a "mediator of the sacred," one of those persons in human history to whom the Spirit was an experiential reality. Spirit persons are people who experience the sacred frequently and vividly.

The story we read earlier from the gospel of Matthew is but one illustration of this. When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, he later described that event to his followers as the "Spirit of God descending on him like a dove," and it was as if God was assuring him, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This was one of many steps in his spiritual journey, which began at his birth. It continued as he grew up, through his relationship with his parents and the Jewish religious tradition in which he was raised. More steps in his spiritual journey came through his association with his followers and his enemies, and through his death and resurrection.

What does all this have to say to us as we enter this new year of 1999 and continue our own spiritual journeys?

First of all, remember all of us are spirit persons because we are created in God's image, and God has breathed into us the breath of life. The Hebrew word for breath means spirit. However, there are special spirit persons, and Jesus was the supreme one, who can help us discover the spirit in us. They become our guides on our own spiritual journeys.

Second, the experience of God's assurance, which Jesus had at his baptism and which he described as being "like a dove," happens to all of us in different ways and places. It is the assurance that life can be all right even when everything in it seems all wrong. In my own experience, God's affirmation of us frequently comes through the experience of another person affirming and accepting us.

I am not talking here about some kind of magic that automatically makes everything all right in an instant. Rather, it is a series of steps in our journey through life, as it was in the life of Jesus.

You would be making a mistake, of course, if you expected everything to happen at once, instantly and fully formed. Your deepening relationship with God and with others may come in fragments, a nudge of power here and a ray of hope there. It may happen in one segment of your life at a time. Do not look for the whole story to be told in one chapter.

You may experience the love and power of God, then lose it, and need to discover it all over again. But God's Spirit is always there waiting and ready. You can be sure of that. All you need is to be open and ready to receive it.

I am going to conclude this sermon with a story I've used before in another sermon. It's an old Irish legend of a ruler who wished to leave his kingdom to the cleverest of his three sons.

He took the first son on a long journey. On the way, he said, "Son, shorten the road for me." The oldest son was overwhelmed by the task, gave up, and returned home.

The king embarked on the same journey with the second son and said again, "Son, shorten the journey for me." Like his older brother, the boy was daunted by the request, gave up, and they too returned home.

The king then took the youngest son on the long journey. Once again, he said, "Son, shorten the journey for me." The youngest launched into a story so long and so engrossing that before the king knew it, they had completed the journey.

That's how the power of God's Spirit works in our life's journey. It doesn't lessen the number of miles on the road, even though God loves us unconditionally. It doesn't reduce the dangers of the journey. It doesn't keep us from making mistakes and sometimes failing. Nor does God walk that long way for us. But like that king on the road, we know that having God walk along with us can make the long, sometimes lonely walk seem shorter and infinitely more bearable. Amen.