

CHRISTMAS EVE
December 24, 2011
Luke 2:1-20
Pastor David Tryggestad
Concordia Evangelical Lutheran Church
Duluth, Minnesota

“Reverend, I just saw a movie you just *have* to see!” The speaker was an acquaintance at the YMCA whom I see once in a while, coming or going. He is Jewish and we talk of our respective religious practices when we see each other.

He continued, “The movie is called *The Way*. It’s about the Way of St. James, otherwise known as the Camino de Santiago, a 500-mile pilgrimage that ends in northwest Spain at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostelo, where the Apostle James is said to be buried.”

My ears perked up, not only because of the man’s genuine enthusiasm, but because I saw a slide presentation of this very pilgrimage of Camino de Santiago given by an Anglican priest when I visited Oxford, England, two summers ago. That priest had walked the pilgrimage and came back transformed.

The man at the YMCA continued, “The movie is about a young man who dies during his pilgrimage of the Way of St. James due to the harsh weather in the Pyrenees. His father, played by Martin Sheen, comes to claim his son’s body, and ends up completing the pilgrimage his son had begun, the father scattering his son’s ashes along the way.”

The father is joined by three unlikely traveling companions; a verbose Dutchman, an acid-tongued woman trying to quit smoking, and an Irish writer with writer’s block.

The movie is about relationships and personal transformation.

In contrast to *The Way*, I thought about another movie Lynn and I saw earlier this year, *The Road*. It’s also a story *on the road*—on the way—about a father and son trying desperately to walk across the country to the west coast after some kind of cataclysmic event that has destroyed civilization. Everywhere there is devastation. Most people are dead, and those who are alive are cut-throat, cold-blooded killers, desperate for their own survival. Out of necessity, the father adopts the kill-or-be-killed behavior of those they encounter. While the father dies along the way, the son reaches the Pacific Ocean, but there is no sense that the destination offers any kind of future with hope, except that the boy is welcomed by a family who takes him in on their own journey, and the movie ends without us knowing what their destination might be.

The Christmas story is about a journey. It is first the journey of a man and a pregnant young woman, traveling from Galilee to Bethlehem. When they arrive at their destination, there is no place for them except with the animals. The woman delivers her baby there. Then there is the pilgrimage of the shepherds, who hear of the child’s birth from an angel, a messenger from God. When we go to the gospel of Matthew, we hear

about another pilgrimage, that of the magi from the East, who follow a star that leads them first to Jerusalem, and then to Bethlehem. We learn that, after the magi depart, there is another journey, this time by soldiers sent by the king, with the mission to destroy this child and all the children in the area. The man, the woman, and the baby manage to escape before the slaughter, and they journey to Egypt. When the coast is clear, they journey back to their homeland.

The shepherds left Bethlehem transformed by joy at what they had heard and seen, and they became witnesses so that all who heard them wondered at what the shepherds told them. The magi, after leaving Bethlehem, returned home by another way; their lives were never the same again.

The Anglican priest in Oxford who had walked the Camino de Santiago talked about the transformation that had taken place in his life, not so much due to the destination, but rather because of the pilgrimage itself, the people along the way, his personal prayer and devotional time as he walked miles and miles every day.

Our lives are a journey, a pilgrimage. Along the way we encounter fellow travelers, who might be as different as a verbose Dutchman, an acid-tongue woman trying to quit smoking, a Irish writer with writer's block, lowly and smelly shepherds, mysterious magi from a distant land, Roman soldiers set on infanticide, or scavenging desperados wielding automatic weapons set on stealing everything we have, especially if it's food, even if they have to kill for it. And there is a father scattering ashes of his dead son, and there is a son, still a boy, who has to leave his dead father behind, and is taken in by another family.

Lynn and I began our Christmas Eve day by listening to the live broadcast of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College in Cambridge, England. The first carol the choir sang after their opening processional was "I Wonder as I Wander." The beginning lyrics sing: "I wonder as I wander out under the sky why Jesus our Savior did come for to die for poor ornery people like you and like I . . ." On our pilgrimage through life we encounter many and various "ornery people" along the way, and we are one of them.

Our lives are a journey, a pilgrimage, and it matters how we live our lives along the way. Circumstances of all kinds befall each of us. All manner of people encounter us and we them. It matters how we engage our fellow travelers. The way we live our lives and the ways we engage other fellow travelers are colored by the destination we seek. We can set out to worship the newborn babe of Bethlehem, or we can set our lives on self-interest. We can set our lives on worship or on self-interest that leads to destruction.

When the baby in Bethlehem becomes a man, he embarks on a journey of his own, a three-year pilgrimage to Golgotha—the Place of the Skull. Along the way, this man gathers followers and teaches them to live according to "the Way"—the way of the cross. He invites us to join him and to follow.

Thanks be to God!