

Psalm 121
Mark 1:16-20

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Trinity Sunday; Confirmation
June 7, 2009

THE ANSWER IS THE JOURNEY

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me . . ." *Mark 1:17a*

Our confirmands are coming off a very busy time. Exams, school drama presentations, important games in sports toward the end of the season. State testing. It goes on for quite a while too—learn this, memorize this, give it back on the test. Except today and the Christian life—unless you are plowing through seminary. The confirmands did have to learn the Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed, but we did that together using both as our opening prayers each week. But no exams.

That's Jesus' model—no tests, no grades, just an invitation, as when he called disciples. "Follow me," he invited. And they did. So have these young people. He gave them no syllabus ahead of time, no academic calendar, no road map, no specific reading list—beyond encouragement to read the Scriptures, no demand to make anything lastingly perfect. Just this—try to be faithful, and learn as you go. Make mistakes. Try again, fall down, pick each other up. No expectation of success, every expectation of some failures. But always a way through, asking forgiveness then hearing those lovely words—"You *are* forgiven." The only expectation, that we try to be faithful to God, to each other, and to our best selves more often than we give in.

If the answer that Jesus gave had been some sort of information, like a mathematical "Aha!" a revelation like someone pointing out a huge error in our favor on an exam or a tax return, then we would have had the answer centuries ago. It would have spread like wildfire. But it isn't about information that validates something. Information doesn't sustain a relationship.

Tom Long, a professor of preaching at Emory, tells of wanting to do something special for his daughter on her sixteenth birthday. He'd felt that their relationship had gotten a bit lost, so made a reservation at a fine restaurant in New York City. The food was splendid, the service impeccable, but the conversation was about as stiff as the maître d's shirt. A couple of days later he confessed to his wife that he felt that the evening was a disaster. "Oh, no," his wife replied. "That's not what she said at all. When I asked her that night how things had gone, she said, 'Oh, Mom, it was just so good to be with him.'"

"If you seek," said Jesus, "you will surely find" Not one of Jesus' teachings tells us merely about God. Instead they invite us into the experience of feeling what God is like: a loving parent who surprises us with astonishing moments of grace. It's the journey in search of, the steady encounter with the experience of God that provides the answer. "Come, follow me," says Jesus. The answer is the journey. The answer is the process.

This journey motif is impossible to get away from in the Bible. It always has two directions: away from, and back to. First separation, then reconciliation. With exile comes an intense desire to journey back to that state of contentment that characterized Eden, the first estate. Rudolph Bultman once portrayed this as “a faint recollection of Eden” that lingers in all of us. To return to an idyllic state for which the heart yearns is what we all long for. Like making up with your best friend. The Bible knows all about this. It is the same basic longing that sends us back to the old homestead, or the place of our birth, or where we first met, or a fondly remembered vacation spot. Jane and I and our girls have been going back to the same spot in the North Carolina Mountains for almost thirty years. We eat in the same restaurants, cook out on the same stone fireplace deep in the woods, take the same walks, amble around the same used bookstore (that would be me). Don’t you just yearn for places that are touched with something pristinely primal. Abraham Maslow saw such rejuvenating spots as among our most basic hierarchy of needs, like love and belonging. Sometimes the bliss we long for is in a remembrance of things past, sometimes we imagine things as they might yet be.

When Jesus called those first disciples, I don’t know what he said to them prior to that, but perhaps he’d already touched their yearning with a sense of its resolution in him. You really want to know? says Jesus. “Come, follow me!”

If we would run our toes through the sands of Eden, a journey has to be made, a journey of the soul into the experience of knowing God intimately. Sharing information about God simply won’t suffice. Neither will sharing experiences. We have to make them our own.

You remember, I’m sure, the story of the Wizard of Oz. How Dorothy is swept up in a cyclone and deposited in the Land of Oz; how she is joined by three remarkable characters in search of the Wizard of Oz who will answer all of their questions and thus resolve all their problems. The first is a scarecrow who wants a brain more than anything else. The second is a tin woodsman who yearns for a heart. The third is a cowardly lion who wants courage so that he can be “a lion.”

Their journey is a perilous one. But whenever they are confronted by danger it is the cowardly lion who fights their way through. When the danger is more cerebral it is the brainless scarecrow who figures a way out. And the tin man exudes so many tears in sympathy that the oil cans work day and night to keep him moving.

The wisdom of the story is of course that the very things they seek come not as a prize at the end but as a discovery in the process.

I think it has not been put any better than by Joseph Campbell in his extraordinary book, *The Power of Myth*.

We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a God. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.

We have a map, and we have a compass, and a star called Christ to steer us by. And we can go together so that the journey will not be alone. Amen.