

His journey had begun, all of those years ago, in a cave, in the dark, where the only light came from starshine and the only sound was that of sheep shuffling down to sleep. The journey to that moment, of course, had begun generations before, when God had looked upon the chosen people and seen them scattered and harassed, like sheep with only the worst of shepherds. And God had declared that this would be no more. The days are surely coming, God had said, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

The words of that promise had waited, in the world, in the dark, until one day an angel appeared unto a young girl born of generations of that waiting. Fear not, the angel said, for I come to bring you tidings of great joy. And Mary said Be it unto me according

to thy word. And then there was a baby, in the silence, in the dark. And then there were shepherds and kings. And then there was a flight into Egypt and a journey to the temple. And then there was a baptism in the Jordan and a temptation in the wilderness. And then there were disciples, and a sick mother-in-law, and a wedding, and a mother who wouldn't take no for an answer. And then there were parables and arguments and healings and exorcisms. There were women caught in adultery and tax collectors sitting by the road and little men climbing up trees. There was warning and welcome, rejection and repentance. There was a trek to a mountaintop where the disciples heard a voice from heaven tell them to listen to the one they followed, and there was a parade down into a valley where all the disciples could hear was the sound of Hosannas as they followed their Lord to Jerusalem.

And then, there was this. Then, there was the cross. Then there was this righteous branch hung up on a sad and shameful tree,

the king arrested and mocked, the judge convicted with trumped up charges, the healer broken and dying. Then there was only this. The scourging and the agony. The vinegar and the gall. The shame, the sorrow, and the utter defeat of death. What kind of a journey was this for the King of Kings?

But then, what did the thief say as he hung on the cross near his Savior? Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. For the thief knew something that we have left out of our story so far – that this world is not the kingdom of the King of Kings. This world, with its thieves and its scoundrels, this world with its violence and deceit, this world with its dog-eat-dog and its *quid pro quo* is not his kingdom. In his kingdom, the lowly are lifted high and the hungry filled. In his kingdom, the thieves repent and the repentant are forgiven. In his kingdom, there is no want. In his kingdom, there is no fear. In his kingdom, there is no death. And this king, who hangs upon this cross, in this act of fulfillment and sacrifice and great, great

love, is making this kingdom come. His has not been a journey of shame, sorrow, and defeat. His has been a journey of thanksgiving.

Jesus gave thanks to God his Father every day of his life, at every step along his journey. Jesus gave thanks to God before he could even speak, looking up at the stars shining in his mother's eyes and feeling his heart swell with gratitude for her courage and love. Jesus gave thanks for the leaders of the temple who listened to his ancient wisdom spoken with a twelve-year-old voice. Jesus gave thanks for his heavenly father's presence at his baptism and in the wilderness. Jesus gave thanks for the presence of his disciples on the seashore and the presence of the first seeds of their faith. Jesus gave thanks for the people who were pulled after him like metal after a magnet, even when they interrupted his silences, even when they disturbed him when he was on retreat, even when they were harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd. Jesus gave thanks for dinners with sinners and for faith where he found it, especially in unexpected

places. Jesus gave thanks to God his Father over and over again, and when he found himself in the upper room, in the dark, he gave thanks for his disciples and prayed that his heavenly Father would care for them when the time of his glorification had come, here on the cross.

Jesus' whole life was a Thanks Giving Journey. How do I know this? It's a fair question. The Gospels are not exactly chock-full of references to Jesus' giving thanks. They all describe his giving thanks before eating, whether feeding 5000 in the wilderness or just his little band of disciples on the night he was handed over to suffering and death. Jesus thanks God his Father for revealing his will to him and to his disciples, and he thanks God the Father again for hearing him before he raises Lazarus from the dead. But the other expressions of thanksgiving that I have imagined here are simply not in the text.

So how do I know that Jesus' whole life was a Thanks Giving Journey? Because Jesus' whole life was shaped by his knowledge, by his sure and certain understanding, that he was beloved of God. Jesus

knew that he was God's beloved son. He knew that God was well-pleased with him. He knew that God's love for him would never fail, and he knew that that love would make all the difference. Jesus' entire being shone with the light of that truth, and nothing could overcome the force of that light, not even his death on the cross.

For God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten Son and then gave us the gift of everlasting life by raising him from the dead. In other words, for God so loved you that God saved you before you were even born, before you could do one single thing to make yourself worthy of that love. What wondrous love is this. In the face of such great love, what else can we do but give thanks? In the face of such great love, what else can our lives be but journeys of Thanks Giving? The enormity of that love is hard for our feeble, self-doubting, wonderfully human minds to grasp, and yet that is exactly the task of Christian discipleship - to first grasp how greatly we are loved, to let that love to marinate the tough and tender places of our

souls, and then to let that love loose upon the world. It is the primary task of our discipleship to believe the Good News – that we are loved into being, loved into living, loved into eternity. Or, to put it more poetically, “For the love of God is broader/than the measure of the mind;/and the heart of the Eternal/is most wonderfully kind./ If our love were but more faithful,/we should take him at his word;/and our life would be thanksgiving/for the goodness of the Lord.”

In a few moments, we are going to be asked to take another step along our Thanks Giving Journey. We each have a pledge card – mostly already filled out, I’m guessing – and we will be invited as a community to journey from wherever you are right now – in your pew, in your heart, in your life – to this spot and to place your pledge card or family Thanks Giving basket in this offering basket. First, the practical. There is no right or wrong way to do this, no right or wrong order to this procession. Just make your way to the head of the aisle here, place your card or family basket in the offering, and then make

your way back down the center aisle to your seat. Second, if you’ve already filled out a pledge card, or made your pledge online, I hope that you’ll write that on another pledge card and bring that forward so that we are all journeying together. Third, well, third, I could make a joke about how before you come forward you should take out your pledge card and write another zero at the end of it, and if you’re going to do that, no one here would complain, but here is what I really hope for. I hope that every step of that journey from your pew to the front and back again will be a step of Thanks Giving. I hope that you will take God at God’s word and allow God to transform your whole life into one thanksgiving hymn. I hope that as you come forward, you will recall all of the gifts that you have found in your life in these weeks of our Thanks Giving Journey. I hope that as you come forward you will look up at this cross and see the depth of God’s love, the breadth of God’s generosity, the height of God’s hope for you and for me. I hope that as you come forward you will feel yourself treading

on holy ground, the sacred space that is the Church of the Atonement, where Christ your King is present in the bread and in the wine, in the holy words of holy scripture, and, importantly, in the people sitting next to you, in your neighbors, and in you. I hope that in this place, in this holy light, you will know that Christ remembers you in his kingdom. I hope that you will know that with each step of your journey, each step of thanks, and each step of giving, you are part of that kingdom come.

*Preached by Mother Erika Takacs*

*The Feast of Christ the King*

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