

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W53
Christmas (Reading II) 7:30 p.m. Eucharist
Saturday 24 December 2016

Isaiah 62:6-12
Ps 97:1-12
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:8-20

Paths Home

"... prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa. 40).

We move through the world on paths laid down long before our birth. We follow career paths, artistic paths – philosophical, ethical and political paths.¹ Like a trail through the wilderness they both guide and constrain us. They lead us from a beginning to an end. Without them we would be forced to cut our way slowly through brambles, repeating the same basic mistakes and reinventing the same solutions.²

Our way of parenting is such a path. On December 22, 1998 I began my journey as a father. That day I spent an unseasonably warm morning at Lamont Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At lunchtime the weather turned and I stepped out into a gathering snowstorm. At our apartment I heard the surprising news that my wife Heidi was pregnant and then immediately rushed in to spend the rest of the day at her office.

I cannot even find words to describe the joy we felt. We were young and so in love. We longed to share our daily happiness with another being. In those days every moment felt deeply significant, consecrated by God as holy. On that Christmas, the angel Gabriel's message to Mary came true for us too. Despite the obvious and inescapable darkness of the world, at moments like this, God's joy eclipses everything else.

This week the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof asked a simple question of the evangelical author Tim Keller.³ Kristof asked if he could be called a Christian if he did not believe in the virgin birth or the resurrection. Tragically, I believe, the pastor said, "No."

For Keller there can be no compromise and no real mystery. He thinks that if you do not see the world in the same way that he does, you cannot call yourself a Christian. I could not disagree more. His test leaves out some of the most faithful people to Jesus in history.

Keller begins with the wrong metaphor. Christianity, or to use a better description, the way of Jesus, is a path not a belief. It encompasses a set of traditions, stories, rituals, prayers and other actions that, through the spirit of Jesus, help us to find our way home to God.

Christmas celebrates the origin of this divine path. It begins when the angel first appears to Mary and she says yes. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word" (Lk. 1). God acts in human history through the person of Mary and now, if we can say yes, through us.

The angel announces the birth of Jesus to shepherds saying, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people" (Lk. 2). The English construction, like the Greek, is so strange – it is overly joyful. Calling this good news is not enough; it also involves great

joy. Make no mistake about it this is exactly what every person longs for. We all want to be happy.

Our culture and education focuses almost entirely on the external world, on material things. So we try to be joyful by having more: more money, success, power, credentials and possessions. We assume that succeeding will make us happy and forget that happiness comes from here – from our heart.

Happiness is elusive. You don't get it by just saying, "I'm going to be happy now." The truth is that we do not find joy. It finds us. We most reliably experience joy when we live in gratitude, when we are spiritually connected to our creator, open to the gifts that might be hard to see. We experience joy when we travel the path of Jesus.

Jesus' teaching is so simple. He says love your God and love your neighbor. Sometimes our ego might fight against this. But the Christmas miracle is that the truth of Jesus, and the spirit of Jesus, have come into the world and help us when we need it most.

Through our children we see the familiar with new eyes. This fall my son Micah read Fyodor Dostoyevsky's last book *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).⁴

In it the monk Zossima tells the story about a period in his life when he lost sight of the way of Jesus. When he was a young officer in the Russian army and was away, the woman he loved married another man. When Zossima came home he crudely insulted his rival and challenged him to a duel.

The night before the duel Zossima flew into a senseless rage at his butler. For no reason he punched the servant twice in the face so that the man was covered in blood. // Waking up early the next day Zossima went to the window and looked out at the garden. He saw the beauty of the rising sun as the birds sang. He wondered about the meaning of it all.

For a moment Zossima did not even know why he felt dissatisfied. But a deep sense of shame arose in his heart as he remembered what he had done to his butler. In his mind's eye he saw how the man quivered straining to not raise his arms as he was struck. Zossima immediately ran to the servant's room bowed his head to the ground and begged forgiveness of the terrified man. After this he felt an amazing lightness, a confidence evident to everyone.

Later, at the duel, the men marked out twelve paces. Zossima's adversary shot first. The bullet grazed his cheek and ear. At this point he astonished everyone throwing his gun away and shouting, "Thank God that no man was killed."

To the man who had just shot him he said, "Forgive me... for [insulting] you and for forcing you to fire at me." The men from Zossima's regiment were horrified by the apology and blamed him for dishonoring them.

But from Zossima said, "Gentlemen, look around you at the gifts of God, the clear sky, the pure air, the tender grass, the birds. Nature is beautiful and sinless, and we, only

we, are sinful and foolish... we don't understand that life is heaven, for we have only to understand that and it will be fulfilled in all its beauty."

As he described this moment Zossima says, "there was such bliss in my heart as I had never known before...." For the rest of his life Zossima brought to others this peace that he found in the way of Jesus.

And that's the amazing secret of Christmas isn't it. We discover joy not by seeking it for ourselves but by bringing it to other people. In fact no matter how miserable we feel, we always have the power to be Christ's presence for others. We come closest to our spiritual home in those moments when we are full of gratitude and love for the people around us.

The paths we follow through life have beginnings and endings. Here I am, coming to the end of my path as a parent of children. Next year my son will be on the East Coast at college. Everyone in our family has been acutely aware that this is our last season of Advent with him in our home. I believe that this intense love I feel for him is not unlike the love that God feels for us.⁵

I am glad that he will have had two years at Grace Cathedral and that this will always be a spiritual home for him. This year we have been celebrating the theme of "Home." We learned that home does not just refer to this magnificent building. For generations people like us have made this their home. It has become home through the sharing and healing, the hoping and striving – the learning, singing and praying of all the people drawn here by God, and following the way of Jesus.⁶

Tonight this sublime music, the warmth of our feelings for each other, our memories of past Christmases and our hopes for the future – make God's presence feel so tangible. Look around you. Each of you is so beautiful. You seem to be shining with the light of God's love. This is heaven.

We move through the world on paths. As you travel and seek your home in God, I pray that you will experience the good news of great joy. I pray that the spirit of this holy night and of Mary's son will always inspire and sustain you. Merry Christmas!

¹ There are paths that teach us how to treat our body and ones that inform us how others see, or fail to see, us.

² This is a paraphrase of the Epilogue in Robert Moor, *On Trails: An Exploration* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2016) 297. "We move through this world on paths laid down long before we are born. From our first breath there is a vast array of structures already in place – "spiritual paths," "career paths," "philosophical paths," "artistic paths," "paths to wellness," "paths to virtue" – which our family, society, and species have provided for us. In all these cases, the word path is not applied haphazardly. Just like physical paths, these abstract paths both guide and constrain our actions – they lead us along a sequence of steps, progressing toward our desired ends. Without these paths, each of us would be forced to thrash our way through the wilderness of life, scrabbling for survival, repeating the same basic mistakes, and reinventing the same solutions."

³ Nicholas Kristof, "Pastor, Am I a Christian?" *The New York Times* 28 December 2016.

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/opinion/sunday/pastor-am-i-a-christian.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share&r=0>

⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* Tr. Constance Garnett (NY: Modern Library) 308-314.

⁶ We will soon embark on a very different and new path as parents of adult children.

· It has been amazing. This year we met doctors who greet refugees on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and lawyers seeking equal justice for people of color. We studied how politics, inequality and racism undermine the experience of home. We worked on alleviating the suffering of homeless people here in San Francisco. We learned how important spirituality is for young people and how the spiritual diversity of this country may be one of our greatest assets. We discovered a new appreciation for the vast estuaries that make this Bay our home. Most importantly we came together to feel the glorious presence of Christ.