A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Pilgrimage and Threshold*

Matthew 2

January 5, 2019

When I read the scriptures for this morning, I see images. Images, pictures, snapshots, visuals. I wanted to just start by saying, “I’m seeing things” but I thought that might be a little alarming. But sometimes a passage of scripture gives us images to sit with as much as anything else. The story of the magi is one such story, rich with visual images both from the text itself and from the tradition and our imagination of what this caravan might have looked like. I hope you’ll notice in the narthex a piece of art from the artist John August Swanson, given as a gift to us last year for the season of epiphany. It’s a beautiful, colorful image.

Not all of us are artists, but some are in different ways. I know many of you create art and some of you even create art during the sermon. Some may say it’s doodling, but it’s not doodling. It’s channeling, it’s creating is what you’re doing. You’re creating images from the words. As I suggest some images this morning, I’d love to see what you create. And would love to have your images in the narthex during this season if you’d be willing to share.

So, images. There are many from Epiphany, but I want to offer two to set before us this morning for our reflection on today and, I think in some yet unknown way, for this year ahead of us. Something tells me these are going to stay with us: *pilgrimage* and *threshold.*

First, pilgrimage. The journey of the magi to Bethlehem was a journey to see the newborn king of Israel. Guided by the light of a star in the sky, Magi travelled far from the East to see the newborn king. It was a journey with purpose even if they didn’t know exactly where the journey would end. As you know, they thought it would end in Jerusalem at Herod’s palace, only to discover Bethlehem was their true destination.

Their venture wasn’t just a trip or a vacation, it was pilgrimage, an intentional journey toward a sacred destination. The destination is the point, but the purpose isn’t just to check a goal off a list. On pilgrimage the journey is just as important as the end goal. How you get there is as important as where you’re going. Pilgrimage is inward as well as outward.

Not all of us can go to Bethlehem like the magi. I went 20 years ago and still have fond and favorite memories of the cave under the church of the nativity and shepherds still on the hills of Judea. But not all can make such a journey to Bethlehem or Jerusalem, Rome or Assisi, Taize or Lindisfarne. Travel to distant locations is a privilege for those who are able to make it, a significant undertaking.

But one doesn’t have to travel to distant locations for Christian pilgrimage to shape our lives. The church itself represents a pilgrimage journey. In church architecture the center aisle or ‘road’ forward is a symbol of the length of a life: “the life of all creation, of all humanity, of the church as a community, of each individual person. The journey of life in the floor of a church calls to our minds many other significant journeys in biblical faith: Abraham, trusting he would find the promised land, the Jews as a people as they wandered on exodus from Egypt struggling to achieve liberation from oppression, Christ’s journey to the cross and resurrection.” (Margaret Vissar, *Geomertry of Love,* 57) All of these come together as we recall his words to us, “follow me.”

Everytime we come to church, we can imagine our personal journey as a cosmic pilgrimage. For some of us just getting here is an act as heroic as wise men riding camels from the East. Let’s see how many toddlers the wise men strapped in their car-camel seats or how many of them were negotiating back pain and walkers. A Sunday morning pilgrimage here can be a labor of spiritual love, with emphasis on some days on *labor*. Wherever we’ve come from and however we got here, when we turn off the highway onto Renewal Way, the long path of disorientation begins as we leave behind the rush and hurry of our 70 mph lives to enter a peaceful, welcoming pace and place. Disorientation from that world makes possible a new orientation as we move through the doors and the narthex into the sanctuary and then, on many Sundays are beckoned forward to the cross and the Table. Some of us, especially some of the young and nimble among us go even further past the sanctuary deeper into the campus, in the woody paths behind the church while their parents pray they meet God there and not God’s little biting creatures. Mostly they pray they don’t have to go in looking for them when it’s time to go.

This Sunday journey down the way of renewal through the narthex of transition down the aisle to the altar is a pilgrimage we each take individually, and we take together each week. The only thing is, and this is worth saying for sure, is that an uninterrupted line like the center aisle of a church or a straight way of renewal doesn’t begin to adequately capture how life actually works. Life is full of twists and turns and ups and downs and detours and for most of us, like the magi, more than a few wrong turns. Even the mystics missed their mark at first by 9 miles. The spiritual journey is not a straight line. It is not a conveyer belt.

The artists and architects who built the Chartres Cathedral in France understood this hundreds of years ago. Into the floor of the center aisle of the massive gothic cathedral, they inlaid stone to shape an elaborate labyrinth. A labyrinth is like a maze. “All you need to do is choose to start. Enter the labyrinth and then persevere to the end, no matter how far the twisting path seems to be taking you from your goal. This kind of road symbolizes a human life with all its difficulties and failures, and the common feeling of being lost. At the center of the labyrinth is Christ and the soul’s core. Pilgrims have come to Chartres for 800 hundred years not just because it’s a beautiful cathedral, which it absolutely is, but because there, in the floor of the cathedral, they found a representation in stone of the truth of their lives: it’s not a straight line, but it leads somewhere holy and good and true. All of life is a pilgrimage. Every step matters. Every step whether it’s like the twists of a labyrinth to the center or the road of a church’s center aisle from alpha to omega, beginning to end.

That’s the first image. Pilgrimage. Life as a holy journey. The image asks us to ask ourselves, what is your next step and how will you take it?

The second image is threshold. Along the way on any journey we pass through thresholds. A threshold is simply the bottom of a doorway which is simply the opening in a wall through we pass from one space to another. But thresholds are not just in wood and stone but also in space and time. New years and new decades are kinds of thresholds through which we pass from one time into another. On the pilgrimage of coming to church, we pass through a series of thresholds.

From the highway to Renewal Way, that’s one kind of threshold in space.

Through the front doors of the church, open wide to receive you and often flanked by smiling greeters glad to see you. They really are.

The whole narthex itself is a kind of threshold. The whole room for this purpose. A narthex is a space of transition from the world to the sanctuary and back again. You may have noticed the large iron artwork mounted on the wall of the narthex is full of Christian symbols all kind of hidden and revealed, all kind of unsorted but all present. It’s not a world of disorder, but a world in transition. The thread running through the art symbolically extends from door to door in the room, tying together our lives in the world and our lives together in the sanctuary.

Then we enter the sanctuary, the place where we gather for worship. Baptists are fond of saying the church isn’t the building, but it’s the people. True enough. But let us also confess that the room shapes us--our worship, our lives, our spirituality. We know one another as sinners and saints, as brothers and sisters in Christ, through the space in which we gather and what we do there, the words and the water, the songs, and silence, the stone and windows, the bread and wine and the press of hands “May the peace of Christ be with you.”

Yet there is even more. We would be mistaken to limit the experience of church life to crossing the front door’s thresholds to enter the space where all the action is. This too, even this, is a kind of narthex that leads to another threshold. It’s not bound to particular space, but we particularly come to it when we come forward many Sundays to the Eucharist where we find another door swinging open to us.

Romano Guardini writes “The altar is a great mystery. . . whose meaning is probably most clearly suggested by two images: it is threshold and it is table.” <https://catholicexchange.com/the-altar-as-threshold>

Threshold is door, and it has a double significance: border and crossing over. It indicates where one thing ends and another begins. The border that marks the end of the old makes possible entry into the new. As a threshold, the altar creates first of all the border between the realm of the world and the realm of God.”

The end of the old making possible entry into the new. Is this not why we make the pilgrimage journey to church, at whatever cost? Is this not what we’re seeking in Christ after all? This is why we come, to seek the one in whom one thing ends and another begins. Someone told me recently about her church experience in a place far from here as they’ve bounced from suburban wealthy mega church to mega church. I heard about fantastic praise bands and of 60-minute sermons. She told me of incredible children’s ministries and elaborate visitor parking lot organization. She’s a person who generally likes all that stuff, the easy convenience and lively entertainment of modern church production. She told me, “in the church we’re going to now they have communion set on side tables. During one of the songs you can go up and take it if you want it, but it’s never part of the service.” I confess I was half listening by this point, still thinking about 60-minute sermons and about teenagers driving golf cats to shuttle first time visitors to the front doors. Neither can be a good idea, right?

But I sat up straight when she said, to my surprise: “I miss communion. I wish I could take it every week. I need it. It is there that I find that I confess my sins and walk away feeling like God has forgiven me, and I can change my life.” I realized, even with all that other stuff that can surround church life, we’re all looking for the threshold. We all need it. The altar is a threshold for many people, the opening to a mystical experience. The church gives us this—at the altar, in our songs, in the silence, in the longed-for greeting from someone at the front door who didn’t know how badly you needed to hear someone say, “I’m glad to see you.” We all need it.

As Guardini writes, “Threshold is not only borderline; it is also crossing over. One can step over it into the adjacent room or, standing on it, receive Him who comes from the other side. It is something that unites, a place of contact and encounter.

“The essence of revelation is the news that God loves us. God’s love is not simply the love we find also in ourselves, infinitely intensified. Inconceivable mystery, it had to be revealed: an unheard-of act that we can begin to fathom only when it is clear to us who God is and who we are. Its real expression is to be found in the tremendous event of the Incarnation, when God abandoned His sacred reserve, came to us, became one of us, sharing with us human life and human destiny. Now He is with us, ‘on our side.’ Such is His love, and it creates a nearness that man alone never could have conceived.

“Everyone seeks such a mystical experience, a moment when — to use the language of a building — the door swings open. The door shuts again, sooner rather than later. But we have seen, even if only through a crack, the light behind it. And that’s enough.” (*The* *Geometry of Love)*

It's more common to think of time events as thresholds, we pass from 2019 into 2020, from the 10s into the 20s. This space is also a threshold, all of it, from the doors, the narthex, and the altar, to all of it, all of this space blessed today, all of it--the road to the trees. I pray over this place that this is sacred threshold in all your comings and goings, your cleanings and mowings, your prayings and your singings, your confessings and your communings.

Margaret Vissar writes: “Now a church knows perfectly well that it cannot induce in anyone a mystical experience. What it does is acknowledge such experience as any of its visitors has had, as explicitly as it can. A church is a recognition, in stone and wood and brick, of spiritual awakenings. It nods, to each individual person . . .it constitutes a collective memory of spiritual insights, of thousands of mystical moments. A church reminds us of what we have known. And it tells us that the possibility of the door swinging open again remains.”

Threshold. We standing on the threshold of holy encounter right here, just as clearly as they were when they came to the house where they saw the child with Mary, his mother. There, they fell down and worshipped him. And opened their treasures to give the gifts they brought with them on the way.

They went home by another way. Which I think means they were avoiding Herod, which was prudent, certainly. But I think it also may mean something else. Going home by another way I think means not only the route was changed, but they were as well. They made the journey, they crossed the threshold, they encountered Christ and worshipped him, and when they departed for home they did so as changed people.

May it be for all God’s children who need him and call upon his name. May we be renewed in our faith, our hope, and our love for God and for one another in Christ’s name on this pilgrim way. Amen.

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