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Matthew 2:1-12
 Jeremiah 31:7-14
 Psalm 84
 Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19

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 The Second Sunday after Christmas

Who doesn't love a good road trip? When they go well...they are fantastic...life giving and memory making. Gorgeous scenery, your favorite song on the radio, road side diners, getting lost just for fun. But, when they are bad...well...they are nothing short of pure misery on 4 wheels. Traffic jams, flat tires, crying kids, achy backs.

The bad trips for me always included I-95 at a dead stand still on the hottest summer day. Are we there yet for the 100th time. No exit in sight when suddenly you hear...mom...I've got to go to the bathroom. You know those kind of trips.

We always set off with the best of intentions. Hopes and dreams shaping the start of the journey. I often wonder what those hopes and dreams were for the Wise Men as they set out on their own road trip all those years ago. Guided by a single star, they believed something miraculous had happened. Their belief in this miracle fueled their hopes and set in motion one of the greatest road trips of our faith.

What we know about their road trip is this...the Magi traveled from the East – possibly from Persia (modern day Iran) or maybe the Arabian peninsula (modern day Yemen). It was a long journey to be sure. Probably tired and hungry, wondering if they are there yet, they stop in Jerusalem to ask for directions and meet what you might call a bit of a bottle neck. Herod has caught wind of their journey and becomes deeply agitated that a new king had been born. He gathers the chief priests and scribes to ask their opinion of this rumored miracle and the religious leaders confirm the Messiah's arrival in Bethlehem.

Herod was scared and paranoid. Not a great combination for a leader as we know. And so Herod summons the wise men and commands them to go to Bethlehem, find the baby, and report back to him so that he, too, may go and see this child. Luckily, the Wise Men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod after they see the child. You can imagine that their hopes for a successful road trip suddenly were tainted... a crazy king on their backs, a joyful mission marred by greed and fear, and a command that they didn't ask for.

And yet, even though they could have given up or returned to Herod as they had been commanded, they persisted with their mission and obeyed the angel. Their journey was an incredible pilgrimage of hope even with road blocks and stand stills and paranoid kings. They kept traveling because the journey was full of faithful intention and they trusted the path ahead.

So...what makes a journey worth traveling? Especially when you are faced with challenges that push your courage and your patience?

This morning, I want to look at Psalm 84 to help us consider the value of the journey...for the wise men, and for ourselves. Psalm 84 is what we consider a pilgrimage Psalm. It was sung as words of praise for those who were travelling to the Temple in Jerusalem.

These words of praise were meant to lift the travelers hopes and dreams as they navigated road blocks and unexpected delays, tired backs and sore feet, doubt and fear. The Psalmist gives us the first explanation of why the journey of faith is worth embarking upon. He describes the pull of the journey this way... *My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.* A translation I like much better states it this way...*"my soul yearns, even faints ... my heart and flesh cry out for the living God."*

We journey so that we can draw closer to God. We journey so that we can face the obstacles in front of us, seeking love and support, mercy and grace. We journey because God has called us forth to follow him and our souls yearn for a relationship with our God. That's the inner pull of the star. And like the Wise Men, we can do no less than to follow.

The second thing the Psalmist tell us is that we don't begin the journey blindly. We begin our journey to God with a promise that we will be cared for along the way no matter what the road may bring. As the Psalmist states...

The sparrow has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

In other words, there is safety and assurance as we set out, as we follow God's call to us. And, the sparrow trusts in this safety so much that she is able to build her nest and have her young. Something so small and vulnerable builds a life on this assurance.

We yearn to be with God and we are assured that we will be cared for.

The final thing we learn about our journey of faith is that we are also promised joy.

*Happy are they who dwell in your house! they will always be praising you.
Happy are the people whose strength is in you! whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, for the early rains
have covered it with pools of water.*

For the Psalmist, the journey is a place of blessedness, where hope is abundant, and grace abounds. This is why we embark upon a life with God and with Jesus Christ.

*For the Lord God is both sun and shield; he will give grace and glory;
No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk with integrity.*

O Lord of hosts, happy are they who put their trust in you!

As one theologian states about our journey with God,

This is no short-lived or superficial happiness; nor does it ignore the inescapable reality or pain of life and death. Rather, it is the mark of those who have journeyed long, who have loved and lost and somehow remained open and vulnerable enough to love the world again.

We yearn for God because God's love transforms us and encourages us. We yearn for God because God's love gives us strength as well as humility to face what the road ahead.

What a timely message for the New Year. We have all lived through an uncertain journey these past two years and we face the road ahead with a good dose of caution...not knowing what the future will hold. And it goes without saying that COVID has been only one of the challenges many of you have faced.

If there is ever a time we yearn for God, it is now. But I want you to remember that when we trust in God's love for us, we embark upon our future knowing that every step is worth taking, every mile is worth traveling because God has promised to be with us. Let that knowledge bring joy to your soul and strength to your days.

Happy are the people whose strength is in you! whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
Amen.