

A WAY OUT OF NO WAY

Isaiah 40.3-5/Mark 1.1-8

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Ever since Joseph saddled up his donkey and he and Mary made their way down from Nazareth to Joseph's ancestral home in Bethlehem, the Christmas story has involved travel.

And, as the story says and we all know, holiday travel can be brutal.

If you were paying attention to the lyrics of this Cherry Tree Carol, Mary and Joseph are on the road and Joseph seems just a little bit cranky. The carol imagines that Mary and Joseph are walking through an orchard and Mary says, "so meek and so mild: 'Pluck me one cherry for I am with child.'"

"Let the child pluck his own cherry," Joseph replies. Perhaps Joseph is still miffed about the way this child came to be and not at all happy about this forced march.

But the highest tree in the orchard bends down and offers its fruit to Mary and she says: "See, Joseph, I have cherries on command."

You can imagine historians and theologians having a field day with that. Religion scholar, Mary Joan Winn Leith, suggests that this recalls Adam and Eve in the garden where, you remember, humans get into trouble because of another kind of tree and another kind of fruit – except, she says, this is a "somewhat feminist counter-story [where] a man is put in his place by a woman – with God's [and nature's] full cooperation!"

For some of you, this could quickly become one of your favorite Christmas carols.

The carol isn't just about Mary and Joseph traveling together. The carol itself has traveled over time and distance. Leith says it originates in the ninth-century among the ancient Christian communities of Syria – gathered around Aleppo (you remember that name and those news photos of the absolute destruction of that city in the ongoing war in Syria). Its lyrics echo some of the same kind of stories about Mary that were told among their Muslim neighbors in the Qur'an. And it found its way to England around 1500 as Crusaders returned from the Middle East – which is a long and horrible story all by itself; not unrelated, by the way, to the huge mistake our government has made in declaring Jerusalem the capital of Israel.

Suffice to say that the Cherry Tree Carol comes to us this morning having traveled over difficult terrain and over many generations with the potential for moving us through the world in another way – a way where women set the record straight; a way where Muslims and Christians can find themselves in their shared stories; a way where Crusading and violence and conquest is repented and rejected and we come to see ourselves and each other as part of the great human search for spiritual wisdom.

“How endearing and wholly human,” Leith writes, “that Joseph might have had trouble fully coming to terms with his wife’s mysterious pregnancy despite the angel’s reassurances.”

I can think of worse ways to describe one another than “endearing and wholly human” as we try to navigate the mystery of the world.

As you know, Mark doesn't give us a birth story. But the story begins with this same theme: the story of Jesus is about a “way,” about movement, about traveling. Like the Cherry Tree Carol, it echoes words that have traveled over time and distance. Mark has in mind the ancient words of Malachi and Isaiah:

Isaiah 40.3-5

³A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

In the same way, Mark writes:

Mark 1.1-8 (Inclusive Bible)

Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God: as it was written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I am sending my messenger before you to prepare your way,
a herald’s voice in the desert, crying,

‘Make ready the path of our God. Clear a straight path.’”

And so John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem *went out* to John and were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. John was clothed in camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate nothing but grasshoppers and wild honey. In the course of his preaching, John said, “One more powerful than I is *to come* after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water, but the One to come will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.”

It all starts, Mark says, with preparing a “way” and people going and coming.

That’s not by accident. According to New Testament scholar, Mary Ann Tolbert, Mark was written in an age of great mobility. People were coming and going all over the empire. Cultures were bumping up against each other with the opportunity both for new ways of understanding the world and the potential for backlash.

It was a time when the epic “adventurous journey,” of Homer’s *Odyssey* had captured the popular imagination. And Mark portrays Jesus as “a

traveler, constantly journeying from town to town and finally to Jerusalem,” where another kind of journey begins.

It was into that world that Mark tells the story of Jesus with the words of Malachi and Isaiah ringing in his years: “Prepare the way ... make the path clear.”

I’ve been thinking about this and wondering if one of the reasons our experience of Christmas can become stale and empty is that we see it as static. We take needed refuge in fixed traditions. We hold on to songs and images as a way of reminding ourselves of who we are and *where* we are. And then nostalgia begins to take hold of us and we get stuck. And that stuck-ness takes its toll on our experience.

But the Christmas story itself isn’t static. It’s about movement and the birth of a new adventure.

When Mary gets the news she is going to have a baby, she runs for the hills where her cousin Elizabeth lives. Mary and Joseph travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Shepherds come and go. Magicians travel from the East and return home *another* way. Joseph and Mary and the baby become refugees in Egypt, only to return home when Herod is dead. The people of Jerusalem travel out to John in the wilderness and Jesus travels throughout the countryside. And, when he gathers his followers, he sends them out again to adventures of their own.

All of that coming and going was the reality of Mark’s world and it isn’t all that unfamiliar to us. It is, I think, a metaphor for our spiritual lives as well. It’s about movement and discovery and unfolding.

There is a reason why we say about ourselves that “we are a community of faith united in exploring what it means to follow the way of Jesus.”

Like the story of Jesus itself, our spiritual lives are not meant to be static. They call us to a dynamic way of moving in the world, rooted in what Mark calls “good news.”

Here’s the bad news: the way is not always clear. Mountains are tall. Valleys are deep. There are barriers and potholes. There is the inertia of our own comfort. And there is the fear of being vulnerable – that is always part of every journey.

Sometimes our path is not about “a way” but about “no way.”

“No way am I doing that.”

“There’s no way *that’s* going to happen.”

“No way is our government going to be healed of its greed.”

“No way is my life ever going to open up to new possibilities.”

No way.

I find myself saying “no way” a lot these days. I say “no way” to a lot of things that I am committed to stand against, to resist, even to disrupt.

But here’s the thing: I don’t want to get so caught up in “no way” that I am unprepared for “a way” when it opens up.

I was at a benefit hosted by Lydia Flora Barlow on Wednesday night for the Black Prisoners Caucus. They have developed a program called “each one teach one.” When it comes to education for people who are incarcerated, the government says “no way.” So these prisoners developed an educational program of their own – with inmates learning the material of math and science and literature and liberation studies and being the teachers for courses they offer themselves in prison.

By all accounts it is popular and empowering and can change the whole way of life for Black and White and Latino people in prison. And their most important task, they say, is to make sure that there is a way for young people who end up in prison to re-imagine their lives.

In other words, those black prisoners are preparing a way out of no way.

In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was preaching on Christmas morning. It was only a few months later that he would be dead. But on that Christmas morning he remembered the hot August afternoon in 1963 when he stood on the steps of the Lincoln memorial and talked about a dream.

I must confess, he says, that not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare, just a few weeks after I talked about it. It was when four beautiful, unoffending, innocent Negro girls were murdered in a church in Birmingham, Alabama. I watched that dream turn into a nightmare as I moved through the ghettos of the nation and saw my black brothers and sisters perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity ... I saw the dream turn into a nightmare as I watched the war in Vietnam escalating ...

Dr. King could see “a way” of peace and justice and compassion but the country kept saying “no way.”

Dr. King winds up that Christmas sermon by saying:

I still have a dream, because, you know, you can't give up in life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you to go on in spite of it all. And so today I still have a dream ... I still have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill will be made low, the rough places will be made smooth and the crooked places straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. I still have a dream that with this faith we will be able to

adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism.

Dr. King is talking about preparing ourselves for a way that comes out of no way. And Dr. King and those prisoners are an inspiration to me in this season not to give in to “no way.” Whatever is going on in the world or in your life or in mine, I want to be preparing for a way being made out of no way.

Cherry welcomed us this morning with a poem by Jan Richardson, “Blessing the Door.” And as we about to leave, I offer her “Blessing of the Way” that was written with this text from Mark in mind: “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” – a way out of no way.

*With every step
you take, this blessing rises up
to meet you.*

*It has been waiting
long ages for you.*

*Look close
and you can see
the layers of it,*

*how it has been fashioned
by those who walked
this road before you,*

*how it has been created
of nothing but
their determination
and their dreaming,*

*how it has taken
its form
from an ancient hope*

*that drew them forward
and made a way for them
when no way could be
seen.*

*Look closer
and you will see
this blessing
is not finished,*

*that you are part
of the path
it is preparing,*

*that you are how
this blessing means
to be a voice
within the wilderness*

*and a welcome
for the way.*

Today, if you hear that voice – the voice the ancient Israelites heard and the voice the people going out of their way to hear John heard and the voice Dr. King heard and the voice those black prisoners are hearing – today, if you that voice crying out in our wild and crazy world, “Look, I am preparing a way out of no way,” today if *you* hear that voice, for God’s sake and your own, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Mary Joan Winn Leith, “The Origins of ‘The Cherry Tree Carol: How a Christmas carol links the modern Middle East and medieval England,’” October 11, 2016, www.biblicalarchaeology.org. Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Fortress Press, 1996), pp.38-39. Dr. King’s Christmas sermon appears in the collection, *Marry Christmas, Baby*, Paula L. Woods & Felix H. Liddell, ed. (HarperCollins, 1996), pp.105-114. Jan Richardson’s, “Blessing the Way,” is in *Circles of Grace*, p.27.