



SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN
THE EVANGELIST

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Title: **Home at Journey's End**

Preacher: Br. Todd Blackham, SSJE

Texts: Advent 1 Year A

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Psalm 122

Br. Todd Blackham encourages us to prepare ourselves for the ongoing pilgrimage of faith that leads us home.

“Now is the moment to wake from sleep... the night is far gone, the day is near.” I don’t know about you some days it’s easier to wake up than others. Sometimes, when the alarm clock goes off I think, surely it can’t be that time already? But there are other days when the anticipation of a new day makes it hard to get to sleep at all. Eyes pop open even before it’s time and you’re filled with energy and enthusiasm. I suppose it usually has something to do with what’s in front of me that makes the difference.

And this is just the time of year when the Church points us to what’s ahead. “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.” In this very first week of Advent, Jesus tells us to be ready for the unexpected day of the Lord. He gives vivid examples. In contrast to those who were blithely chasing the pleasant moments of life, Noah had his attention fixed to hear what God was calling him to prepare for. And another image... if you knew that someone would try to break into your home at night, you would fortify yourself, your home, to protect from the one who comes “to steal, kill, and destroy.” It’s a call to readiness that addresses both the sinister and the sublime. There are things to avoid, to evade, those powers of darkness that hinder us. And there is a goal, a telos, towards which to progress, the coming of the day of the Lord; the attraction of the Glory of our Lord Jesus.

As we awaken this Advent there are any number of ways we find ourselves fighting back against the forces of darkness, we strive against injustice and exploitation, we examine our own interior lives to guard against pride, dishonesty, greed, and lust of all kinds. Inside and outside there are battles to be waged against the evil one. So much so that it can feel like we are pressed on all sides; that we are caught in a swarm of attack with nowhere to turn. And in that situation, maybe it's time to seek higher ground. It's time to lift our eyes to the horizon and let the attraction of Christ's glory draw us on to new ground.

This is what makes our lives of faith a journey, a pilgrimage, rather than a bunker defense strategy. The image of a journey, a pilgrimage, is an apt one for the life of faith in Christ because presupposes that there is a destination in mind. What might not be immediately apparent are the twists and turns that the road might make on the way to our journey's end. The delays and detours are unpredictable but there is a gleaming hope towards which to progress. How can a person remain ready in the way Jesus evokes? How can we stay awake and ready each and every day on the journey of a lifetime of faith? To be such a pilgrim really does require our whole selves and we depend on each other as well.

Both Isaiah and the Psalmist echo the theme of pilgrimage, going up to Jerusalem, the holy mountain of God. For, inasmuch as Christ came to us he is also drawing all people to himself with an inexorable pull. Like the story of the Lost Son and his Father, the son returned to himself and began the journey home, while the Father saw him at a distance and came running to meet him. We are on our way home and Christ is coming to meet us. This is the pilgrimage of our lives to God and being met by God.

I'm especially captivated by the stories of early pilgrims to the Holy Land, Egeria in the 4th century, who made her way from perhaps as far as Portugal or France and spent three years exploring the land of the Holy One. Or, medieval pilgrims from England, like Margery Kempe, passing all the way

through Europe and into ancient Palestine. It's astonishing to me the fortitude, commitment, and trust these pilgrims had to make such long, arduous, treks. They really put their whole lives, body and soul into it. There was peril and promise and they were willing and able to endure.

And endurance like that made the destination became more than just a weekend tour. Obviously, they would want to make the most of that kind of once in a lifetime opportunity. To stay for months and years on end turns a pilgrimage site into a home of sorts. To have the time to really unpack and inhabit a place, to entrust oneself to the hospitality of those who call it home is a rich and fulsome experience of becoming a part of the destination itself, dwelling and abiding in the ways that Jesus speaks of.

I've made my own trips to Jerusalem, but I'd call them cursory in comparison to those great pilgrim journeys. It's hardly the same to get there in about 24 hours via plane, and spend 10 days on a tightly guided itinerary. It's not quite the kind of journey that really mirrors the pilgrimage of a lifetime of faith seeking after Jesus.

The destination and end of our walk with Christ is to finally meet God face to face, dwelling in light inaccessible. To know even as we are known. To behold the beatific vision of the Triune God, and there to dwell, to make our habitation. But there is no direct flight, and trek is often uphill.

The closest approximation of that sort of journey for me was when I moved from Boston to Los Angeles in 2007. I packed up all that would fit in my Honda Civic, and with the help and companionship of a good friend, I set out to drive 3,000 miles to a new home. It totaled almost 50 hours of driving over the span of about a week. There were days when the thought of waking up and getting back in the car was completely repugnant, and other times that I wished I could have stayed to enjoy a new city and new friends along the way. But, I had a destination to reach a new home in which to dwell.

I learned a few precious lessons on that cross-country expedition that translate pretty readily to our lives as pilgrims. First, I needed companionship, someone who could take the trip with me. To cheer and encourage me along the way, to share the work even to prod me along when I became weary and cantankerous. I learned to delight when the road was tranquil and beautiful but not to hold too tightly because there would be some stretches that felt interminable with obstacles that would require all my energies. And above all, I learned to fix my eyes on the final destination because it was God calling me to a new home and everywhere else I travelled I was only passing through.

As we prepare to welcome Christ in our midst this Advent, we prepare ourselves for the ongoing pilgrimage of faith that leads us home. Keeping always before our eyes, Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. What stage of the journey do you find yourself in? Be awakened to how God is drawing you on. Have you become comfortable and complacent and lulled to sleep by a sense of security? Be on your guard against the temptation to hunker down and refuse to be moved. What resources do you need to make the next leg of the journey? Fix your eyes on Christ who will always call you to new depths of love in the self-offering of the cross and new and glorious life in his resurrection.

“Now is the moment to wake from sleep... the night is far gone, the day is near.” We are waking up to a new day to draw ever closer to Christ. Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers. May the shimmering hope of Christ on the horizon fill you with the power of the Holy Spirit to travel onward up to the mountain of the Lord’s house, that we may behold him in his Glory and rest in his presence forever.

For Reflection:

The readings for this Sunday focus our attention on being ready, or rather on “readiness.” They are full of both the anticipation of unknown dangers and the sure knowledge of peace that awaits us. In his sermon, Brother Todd reminds us that Christian readiness helps us to fight back against the powers of darkness (within and without) and beckons us onward.

*Life of faith is a pilgrimage not lived in a bunker; our faith assumes a destination! What stage are you at in your ongoing pilgrimage? Are you comfortable? Complacent? Lulled to sleep? Are you hunkering down and refusing to move? Or are you at the ready?

*Who are your companions on this pilgrimage? Who (or what) encourages you, shares the work, and prods you when you become too comfortable?

*What is delighting you on this journey? What joys of travel will you tell others about? Do you find that the obstacles become a part of the joyful story telling?
