

Sermon010112
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Living In-Between
Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

There is the familiar story about the man who had a medical check-up, and a few days later the doctor called with the lab results. The doctor sounded a bit grim when she said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news and some worse news for you – which do you want to hear first?" The man was taken aback and said he guessed he'd hear the bad news first. The doctor said, "The bad news is that you only have 24 hours to live." "Why I barely have time just to get my affairs in order, update my will and say goodbye to my family! What could be worse news than this?" The doctor replied, "The worse news is that I was supposed to tell you yesterday but I procrastinated."

There is something about the first day of a new year that makes us realize all the things we were going to accomplish this past year but somehow the time and opportunity slipped by. The bad news is that we don't have time to get things done, and the worse news is that we didn't use well the time we did have!

How should we live each day that comes to us? How should we approach today, tomorrow, the new year? I think one of the problems we have living in the ordinary day by day world, is that the models of living that we see around us have to do with dramatic, crisis moments of decision. Most of what we read, or see on TV or on a movie screen are about great, earth-shaking events and decisions – traumatic crises or fast moving adventures, crucial moments in a relationship, once in a lifetime situations. And we all have a few of those dramatic moments of stress and turning points in our lives – such as birth, career decisions, marriage, that once in a lifetime vacation, as well as crises in career or marriage or family, and especially death.

Much of the Bible is filled with dramatic moments of God intervening in people's lives, and the ways people have decided – or not decided – to follow God. We read of the birth of Jesus, and of crucial turning points in his life and ministry. One third of the entire Gospel accounts have to do with one week in his life – his triumphal entry into Jerusalem through his death and resurrection.

But what his in-between years? What does the Bible tell us about living after Christmas, about living in-between the great moments and decisions of our lives?

After Jesus' birth we only have a glimpse or two of most of his life. Luke tells of an incident in Jesus' life when he turned 12 and his equivalent of a Bar Mitzvah in Jerusalem. The only other account, until he turned around 30 years old, is our New Testament reading that briefly shows the family moving to Egypt for a year or so, and then relocating in Galilee, in the little town of Nazareth. In a several year period they lived in three different places, a traumatic experience for those living in traditional society. In and around some dramatic events, such as Jesus's birth, and the wrath of a paranoid dictator, Herod the Great, the family somehow made the necessary arrangements and lived as quietly and ordinarily as possible.

One approach to living in-between, in the ordinary days and weeks that fill up most of our lives, is that of the cartoon character Ziggy. In one cartoon he looks out the window at the rising sun, and says, "Another dawn...another brand new beginning. This could be the start of something mediocre."

Joseph at least didn't have the opportunity to fall into this kind of mediocre routine – several dramatic crises kept shaking up his life too much for this to happen! – at least until he finally settled in Nazareth. Not all routine is bad, much is helpful – allowing us to use our limited energy and time on other matters – as long as we are somewhat intentional about what routine we allow, and what we change.

There is a story that comes out of the Russian Czars about a sentry standing day after day at one particular post with no apparent purpose for his being there. Someone asked him why he was standing there. "I don't know," the sentry replied, "I'm just following orders." The person asked the captain of the guard the same question – and got the same answer. Several people in higher authority got curious about this, and after checking some old records found out that about one hundred years before Catherine the Great had planted a rosebush and had ordered a sentry placed there to protect it. The rosebush had been dead for over 80 years, but the sentry still stood guard.

That is one of the dangers of living in-between – there may have been a good reason for some of our habits or routine at one time, but unless we periodically re-examine our lives – and our faith – we may be wasting some of our time, caught in unneeded ruts.

One of the great dangers of living in-between is that we can forget why we are living, we lose sight of earlier dreams and purpose for life. A fortune teller studied the hand of a young woman and said, "You will be poor and very unhappy until you are 37 years old." The young woman wondered, "Well, after that, what will happen? Will I become rich and happy?" The fortune teller shrugged and said, "No, you'll still be poor, but

you'll be used to it after that." That's a real danger, that we get too comfortable with living in-between and lower our sights to what God can do in our lives and through us in the world around us.

Joseph shows us that there are other approaches we can take to living in-between. He kept moving and changing until he found his spot – and only then did he allow his family to settle down and live those in-between years. Back in the '50's there was a rallying cry of "seize the time," size the opportunity. That still can be an important attitude.

A teacher asked his class to name the four chief points on the compass. One child said, "But teacher, there are five chief points." When asked to name them the student replied, "North and south, east and west, and the place right where you are." Then the student added, "That's the place to take hold of, right where you are."

As Christians we are called to find the possibilities in today, in each new day. Even when living in-between we can find much that makes a difference in people's lives.

In the vestibule of St. Janurius Catholic Church in Naples, N.Y., there is this sign: "ON THIS DAY – Mend a quarrel. Search out a forgotten friend. Dismiss a suspicion and replace it with trust. Write a love letter. Share some treasure. Give a soft answer. Encourage youth. Keep a promise. Find the time. Forgive an enemy. Listen. Apologize if you were wrong. Try to understand. Examine your demands on others. Appreciate, be kind, be gentle. Laugh a little more. Express your gratitude. Worship your God. Take pleasure in the beauty and wonder of the earth..." There is so much that we can do in the so-called ordinary days of our lives.

Even as we look for the many opportunities in each day, we can also stand back and keep a larger perspective on life. A family had invited a number of guests to dinner. As each one arrived they invariably asked the 7 year old daughter, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Each time the little girl said, "I don't know." Finally, after the fifth person had asked the same question, she exclaimed, "How should I know? I don't even know what I want to be in the third grade!"

Here is where our Christian faith can give us some real help in life. Our faith gives us a larger picture of our world and its history, and of what God wants to accomplish in it – and in our own lives. We may not know all the specifics, but we have a vision of how the world should be living, in harmony and peace, with love and consideration of others as the foundation of our vision. The power of God's love in our faith enables us to have a larger picture, and to have hope and confidence in the future, no matter what it may appear today. The Bible was written over a period longer than a

thousand years, and it reminds us that God's perspective is much larger than ours. We Americans especially have a small concept of history. For us even a hundred years ago is ancient history! Our sense of perspective usually goes back only as far as our memories carry us, and thus the way we plan for future can be rather short sighted.

A Mid-East professor, Dr. Kenneth Bailey, once was with a group of Egyptian Christians visiting a high level dignitary in the Eastern Orthodox Church in Lebanon. The dignitary told the Egyptians, "We felt badly for you when you were overrun." At first Bailey assumed he was referring to the war a few years earlier when the Israelis overran part of Egypt. But later he asked one of the Egyptians if that was it. "Oh no, he was referring to the Muslim overrunning of Egypt in the year 628." Everyone in the room, except the American, instantly knew the reference, because in the Mid-East people have a long sense of perspective that covers hundreds, even thousands of years. Sometimes that can be a problem, to hold on to too much of the past – but that is not usually our problem. Christian faith, if we let it, can give us a much broader perspective that gives a larger meaning to our living in-between, giving our daily living a larger purpose. A perspective that includes the Incarnation, a baby being born 2000 years ago that means God is with us today! A perspective of Jesus' life and death, that we remember at Christmas, and when we celebrate communion, and every Sunday, at least! – all this points us to the power of grace. Love, forgiveness, service.

A week after the great moment of Christmas, we now are settling back into our normal routine of living in-between. But Howard Thurman, in his poem "The Work of Christmas," reminds us that there is much we can do in the ordinary times:

"When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoners, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, to make music in the heart."

Today, tomorrow, this year, the work of Christmas is to be lived!