

What is it that makes a journey a “journey?” If you go on a journey, what’s different from that than, let’s say, going from your living room to your kitchen, or walking from the doors of the church to a pew? You probably wouldn’t describe a mundane, A-to-B movement with that word.

I’d propose several elements that make a something a journey. For one, a journey is a personal endeavor. It’s a trip that affects you, maybe even changes you.

Also, a journey is a movement with an end point, a goal in mind. To journey entails purpose.

And third, during a journey, the trip itself and the events that happen along the way are meaningful, often having significance almost as great as the destination itself.

Now why did I spend all that time talking about what a journey is? As it turns out, our Gospel text deals quite a bit with that idea. The word “journey” isn’t found in our English translation, though it’s there in the Greek, but even without having to be Greek scholars, we can see people who are on a journey.

The first person whom we hear journeying in our text is Jesus Himself. St. Luke records that Jesus is “on the way to Jerusalem.” That “on the way” is our journeying word.

Jesus is headed to Jerusalem, not just by chance, but meaningfully, purposefully. This is an intensely personal endeavor for Him. He is taking this particular trip to Jerusalem to fulfill the very reason for which He came to this earth. He is headed there to suffer, die, and rise again.

Like the Good Samaritan whom we heard about last week who acted in mercy, Jesus is going to Jerusalem in mercy, to bring about the greatest act of mercy in history. The Almighty God who took on flesh and was born in Bethlehem, who sailed on and calmed the Sea of Galilee, who walked countless miles on the dusty roads of Samaria and Galilee, this God has now set His face toward Jerusalem. He has lamented how this city kills the prophets and stones those sent to it, and He knows that such a fate awaits Him there. But still, He journeys there, to that destination which will pour forth the mercy of God for all men.

But His trip there is not an instantaneous one. We first hear of Christ’s setting His face toward Jerusalem back in Luke 9, and He won’t arrive there until the Triumphal Entry in chapter 19.

Now, all those chapters aren’t filled with useless tidbits or descriptions of scenery along the way. No, they contain the ongoing ministry of Christ: His teaching of the crowds, His rebuking of the sinful, His comforting of the suffering.

On the way, Jesus constantly pours forth the steadfast love and mercy of God to a world in desperate need of it. His journey, both the final destination and the events along the way, is one of mercy.

That mercy is shown forth in an encounter recorded in our Gospel lesson. We read, “And as He entered a village, He was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’”

These lepers are not on a journey. As lepers, they can’t go anywhere meaningful, as their disease forces them apart from society. No one can take them in. No one – previously – existed for them to travel to to be cured.

They’re adrift in life, days upon days of suffering, seemingly no purpose or meaning, just death ahead.

But then, by the grace of God, they’re brought across the path of Christ on His way to Jerusalem. Word of His power, His love, His mercy, has reached them. That word has kindled the embers of faith within them, and so they cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

They believe that this Jesus can cure the incurable, that He can work deeds that no mere man can work, and that He’ll do this not because they’re good enough but purely out of His compassion and mercy.

In response to their pitiful cries, what does Jesus do? He sends them on a journey! “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” That “go” is our journey word again! These men, who previously had been adrift, having to wander aimlessly through life, are now given purpose and hope from Christ.

He tells them, “Go,” “Journey forth,” to the priests. Why the priests? According to the Levitical Law, it was the priests who were to examine lepers and declare them clean or unclean. In His command to them, Jesus is telling these lepers that He will cleanse them, for He – the God of mercy – never sends people on pointless errands.

No, the lepers are sent by Christ on a journey that will lead to the restoration of their bodies, the restoration to their families and friends, their restoration in being able to join with all the rest of the people in glorifying God together in worship.

As we said about journeys, it’s not just the destination but also what happens on the way that’s significant. That’s true for these lepers. We read, “And as they went, they were cleansed.”

The mercy and power of God in Christ for them had indeed done it’s work. Their sores were healed; their open wounds closed up; their rotting flesh made pure and whole. This restoration was a miraculous one, one that they could scarcely have imagined beforehand. They had been made new.

Yet at this wonderful moment, their paths diverge. All ten have been cleansed. But only one turns back to Jesus. The other nine continue onward to find a priest.

Sure, they were doing what Jesus had told them to do. But a journey, which He had sent them on, often allows for twists and turns, even circling back, on the way to the destination. As we can infer from the text, it likely wasn’t that far from Jesus that they had been healed.

It wouldn’t have prevented them from getting to the priests for them to turn back and offer thanks to the one who had just given them back their lives. In fact, true, full faith would have caused

them to come back, to glorify the God who had restored them. Such a faith would have caused them to realize that the man who had sent them to the priests was Himself the Great High Priest of God.

Yet they continue on their way, hurrying back to get their official approval to return to society. They've got people to see, trips to take, celebrations to plan, businesses to start, fun to have. Turning back would've cost them... an hour or two... and they don't have time for that. The world is calling, and now that they've got what they want from Jesus, they're off.

This attitude of ungratefulness is sadly reflected in many Christians. We receive mercy from God and then go our way, off to seek the things of the world.

Parents bring their children to the Baptismal font, that God would wash away their sins and grant them life and salvation, and out of mercy He does... but then those parents don't bring the child back to God's house to hear His word and sustain that newborn faith, instead letting it starve.

Those sick and suffering cry out to God for deliverance, and out of mercy He restores them... but then the prayers stop, the thanksgiving ends, and their daily lives, including Sunday mornings, become about using that restoration for the things of this world rather than thanking and glorifying God.

Those adrift in the world come in to a church on Christmas, or Easter, hoping that this event will help them, bring them closer to God, and in mercy God does bring them closer through His word, calling them to repentance, telling them of how He was born to die and rise for them, that He loves them beyond understanding... but then that church service just becomes a box to check, a way to relive warm memories, a self-deception of being a "good Christian" as they go back to chasing after the things of this world the other 363 days of the year.

And even if you don't do such things, all Christians are tempted to ungratefulness, to take the gifts of God for granted. We are all tempted to make our journey about ourselves, with Jesus just an occasional stop on the way.

As you daily reflect on His word, pray and meditate on what great gifts God gives you for Jesus' sake, that He would keep you from the sin of ungratefulness and instead increase thanksgiving in your heart.

For as our text shows, the Holy Spirit will most certainly do this. "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving Him thanks."

In response to the mercy poured upon him, this man changes course and comes running back to Christ, shouting God's praises as he goes. This isn't the result of serious deliberation; this is a spontaneous outbreak of joy and thanksgiving. This is the Holy Spirit producing His divine fruit in one who has received His grace.

And this thanksgiving is no mere "thank you." The man glorifies God and falls on His face at Jesus' feet. This is the posture of worship, of confession that this man is God, the God who alone is worthy of praise.

He doesn't care who knows; he doesn't care what anything thinks of him, he doesn't care if they don't like that he's a Samaritan. This is the God who has restored him, and he is going to worship Him.

Such is the thanksgiving which the Holy Spirit works in our hearts. As He leads us to better understand just how much we have been given: that we ought to be in hell but God died for us, that we are protected and provided for by the Almighty Father, that not even the devil himself can tear us away from our Savior's loving arms, then thanksgiving and praise will naturally follow.

Where else would we want to be than in the presence of the God who has saved us? What else would we want to hear but the words of our Lord and His promises of comfort and peace? What better gathering than around our Lord's Table, being strengthened and preserved in body and soul to life everlasting?

We sing with the Psalmist in our Introit: "Blesséd are those who dwell in Your house, ever singing your praise! I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness!"

As we rejoice, our Lord still sends us on a journey. He tells the worshiping man, "Rise and go your way, your faith has made you well" – or more literally – "your faith has saved you." Here again is the language of journey: "Go your way."

And where shall this man go? Think of the words of St. Peter that we often sing in our liturgy: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." The same faith that brought this man back to Jesus will now bring him along to follow Jesus on his journey.

This is us as well. The words spoken to the man are the directions for the Christian life. Rise, God has brought you up from a life of sin and death to a life of righteousness and life. You have been granted faith in Him, and that faith saves you. Now, go, journey, set forth, not back into sin and the temptations of this world, but heading ever onward to the new Jerusalem, the eternal dwellings of God and His saints.

As you journey, the Lord will call you back here to His house, to strengthen you with His grace and mercy, that you might show mercy to those you meet on the way. For by His grace, those you meet may also be called by Him into our journey as the people of God, the Church, heading to the everlasting Kingdom of God.

In the name of Jesus, amen.