

“STILL GOING . . .”
Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3; Luke 2:22-40; Galatians 4:4-7
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Shauna and I have spent a fair amount of time driving along the freeways and highways of the western United States. Some of the routes, like the one between Seattle and Spokane, have been traveled so many times that every curve in the road is familiar. Other routes are filled with surprises around every turn because, although we might know where the map tells us the road is going—the scenery, the towns we encounter, the unexpected hairpin turns—they are all new sights for our eyes. Along the many driving trips that we have taken together, we inevitably pass signs announcing that we have now entered a new county, a new town, or perhaps even a new state. Along one of our first treks together, which happened to be a late night run to pick up a co-worker about 50 miles from Camp N-Sid-Sen, we were passing a sign which announced that we were “Entering Benewah County, Idaho.” I remember as we passed it that Shauna said, “We are in Benewah County; do you feel different?” It was a remark that probably seemed funnier than it actually was due to the late hour; but I remember it clearly to this day, and it has been repeated in our cars many times over the years. Washington state, Benton County, Sacramento, San Francisco County: wherever we are, as I see those “Welcome to” signs—even if we don’t speak the words—I end up playing the “do you feel different?” tape in my head.

The “Do you feel different?” question is one I suspect Mary and Joseph played over and over in their heads as they came closer to the birth of the Christ child. After all the visitors had come to greet the Messiah who was born in the stable, I suspect they settled into a routine that was the same as any other new parent of that time. They went about feeding and caring for their child. They went about making sure that the child was warm and clean, happy and content—just like any other parent would. When Jesus was eight days old, they took him to be circumcised, to be named, and to be presented in the temple. Mary and Joseph did what any Jewish parent would have done, and I suspect they were settling into a nice little life together. Perhaps they were even forgetting about all the commotion that this little child had already caused: angels and shepherds and that whole thing. But they were a family now; did they feel different than the others around them? How could this beautiful baby be the Messiah? How could this cooing, crying, hungry sometimes, sleeping-a-lot baby be anything other than a baby? As they held Jesus, I would bet that all the chaos fell away; and in the quiet moments, they were simply glowing, gleeful, loving parents.

And so they go to the Temple, and there they meet a man named Simeon. And as Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his arms, he proclaims the magnificence of God and celebrates that “he has seen salvation. . . and it comes for Jews and Gentiles alike.” He predicts that with Jesus will come the rise and fall of many in Jerusalem and that many will oppose him. He also says they will not be omitted from feeling the pains of his life. Imagine what that must have been like for Mary and Joseph. First, the dreams and the visions, then a baby, and now this? Simeon is talking about Jesus, about a child who is just days old and looks to be like any other child. Luke says that Mary and Joseph were amazed by what Simeon was saying. Yeah, I bet. Who wouldn’t be?

And let's not forget Anna; she, too, speaks of the amazing things to come for Jesus, the child that Mary and Joseph hold in their arms. I imagine the Temple visit was completely disorienting and bewildering for Mary and Joseph. Who are these people? Can what they are saying be true? He's just a baby! And so they returned to Nazareth, and Jesus began to grow up. And that is all we get of Jesus's childhood until he is 12 years old.

We know the rest of the story. In some ways, I think that is a disadvantage; because even as we celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas, we know that Good Friday and Easter are just down the road for us. I envy Mary and Joseph in many ways because they were living smack in the middle of this life and for them it was just a matter of going on. What else were they to do? They had been given an enormous task: to raise a child—God's son—and that is what they did. I suspect that there were other glimpses, other moments, when they understood how different Jesus was. But most of the time, I would think that they were simply parents: parents who worked, provided a home, and loved their child. They were still going about their business, and sometimes a Simeon or an Anna would interrupt them. And then they would know.

For us, it is New Year's Day. Happy 2006! Do you feel different? New Year's Day is always like crossing those county lines for me because the day does, in fact, stand for something. Another year has passed, and there is time for reflection as we look back on what has happened over the last year. As we look back, I've heard many say that 2005 was the year of the disaster, and they are happy to leave it behind. In Pakistan; on the Gulf Coast—and in all the hurricane zones; among the mudslides and earthquakes; in war zones and amid civil wars; amid battles to recognize the dignity of all relationships, in times of political misdeeds and partisan politics: it has been a difficult and challenging year. But do we feel different? Should we?

On this day, we look forward to the days of 2006. But what is special about this day? On this first day of 2006, we live at a moment of hope and promise that is exactly like the hope and promise that exists on every single day of every single year. The Christ child has come into the world; the Christ child has grown up, and by his ministry and with his followers of many generations, we know our "call." Truly, it doesn't change much. The work we are called to do is really this: Keep on keeping on. We have to keep going. Even when the confetti is flying through the air and the noisemakers are ringing, the truth of our "call" is that we are still going—forward, sideways, and every which way we can. Just like yesterday, we know we are called to work for justice and proclaim mercy in the same way Jesus did as he lived on this earth. It is our "call"—still. Just like last week, we know the hungry and cold who live in Linn and Benton counties must be fed and kept warm during these wet, cold days. It is our "call"—still. Just like last year, we know that somewhere a disaster will strike, and we will be called upon to respond with compassion to those who are displaced and in need. It is our "call"—still. Just like 2000 years ago, it will be difficult to speak up when faith is challenged and when it would be easier to acquiesce to those who rule, not with love, but with power and might. But it is our "call"—still. Do you feel different? For better or worse, we are still going. And we know some of what is to come. And the rest? We will deal with it as it comes, I guess?! It's either simple or difficult to take.

The story of Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Simeon, and Anna is a story that reminds me of the simple nature of life and the simple reality of our days. We all have birthdays, anniversaries, and other days that

we want to celebrate. These celebrations are important as they give us opportunities to look back and reflect upon what has happened to us and what we want to do in the future. They are days to mark where we have been and, hopefully, glimpse where we want to go. But as I think about Jesus, Mary, and Joseph living as a family, and as I read how quickly Luke skips from the birth of Jesus to his ministry, I realize there are times when our desire to mark the days of our lives might just get in the way of our ability to just “do.” Luke’s depiction of the days after the visit to the Temple include only these words:

“When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.”

And so the story continues, with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph still going on in life as a family, because what else could they do? How else could they prepare for what was ahead?

So it is with us, also. On this first day of the new year, the “call” I share with you is to make sure we are still going—still going toward whatever lies ahead knowing we will get through it as individuals and as a faith community. It’s the “call of the energizer bunny”: still going—faithfully. On this first day of the new year, we will soon gather at Christ’s table for communion. As we do so, we gather with those who shared the bread and cup for generations: in new years long remembered and in years long forgotten. We gather here not because the food is extravagant but, instead, we gather for sustenance and to remember we have not been forgotten or left behind by God. At this table we recognize the promises of strength and hope for whatever lies ahead in 2006 and beyond. The table has been set. God’s blessing and guidance continue with us. We are still going—much like Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—into the unknown of the future. Do you feel different? Thanks be to God. Amen.