

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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December 13, 2009
Recompense for the Journey
Isaiah 61: 1-4; 8-11, Isaiah 11:1-2, Luke 2:1, 3-5

Recompense. This word stuck out for me when Janet Dickinson read last week, and then again today, in the passage from Isaiah that Mickey read. In both cases, God will give the people recompense. I had to look it up: the definition of recompense is compensation for injury, or a payment or a reward for work or service performed.

On their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary had to wonder just what recompense they were supposed to get out of their long and difficult journey. Let's imagine: The distance between these towns by today's roads is 86 miles, and there are major changes in topography- hills and valleys. I saw what it looked like when I was there, still- untamed, hilly, dark, cavernous spaces. The story of the Good Samaritan is set on this road- when you see it you can visualize how easily robbers could beat, rob and leave someone for dead.

Back in the time of Mary and Joseph it is unlikely that their journey would have been on a direct road. Samaria was between Nazareth and Bethlehem. Because there was ill feeling between the Samaritans and the Jews, travelers crossing Samaria would not receive any hospitality and could

be at risk of attack. It was like going through gang territory. Instead, Mary and Joseph might have traveled east, into modern-day Jordan and then south on a much longer journey.

Either way, they probably needed the protection of traveling in a group to survive accident, injury or attack by bandits. The common form of travel in those days was by caravan. Caravans traveled about twenty miles in a day, meaning at least a four- day journey with no place to stay except “camping out.”

Tradition says that Joseph lead a donkey that Mary rode because she was pregnant. But there is no donkey in the scripture. Riding a donkey or not, Mary probably required more than 4 days for fear of miscarriage. Perhaps a week or more would be needed for this long and difficult journey. Many of you have been on long, difficult journeys, trips, I can hear it now- “Are we THERE yet?!”

But in the end, there was great recompense for their journey. No matter the circumstance. The relief of safe arrival in Bethlehem, and even in a poor stable, the safe delivery of the mother and healthy baby would have brought great joy for them. And the baby was the Messiah! Emmanuel, God was with them.

But sometimes seems we have to look hard for the recompense for our journey. Our individual journeys certainly have some hard roads with twists and turns. I know our beloved folks in Koinonia 2 had plenty of challenges on their journey this week (Monday started with a leak in the sanctuary roof, toilets and grease traps overflowing and a gas leak in the boiler), and their recompense, besides satisfaction for a job well done, is your appreciation.

But this last week we had some twists and turns in our journey as a nation. One twist was a decision to send 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan. A difficult journey of war we have been on for eight years. A second turn was the acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Peace by the only US president to receive the prize while we are at war. A sign of a task we have yet to achieve, but also a journey we have been on since the beginning of human kind, when Cain killed his brother Abel.

The journey to war in Afghanistan continues for us as a nation, yet most of us have little or no connection to it, it doesn't affect our daily lives. But the long difficult journey continues for the troops who will be deployed again. It continues for the new troops who will go, for their families and friends, and for the Afghan people. Make no mistake, "Some will kill. Some will be killed." I confess to God and to you, I experienced complete

despair over this situation this week. Where is the recompense for anyone on this journey?

This week we also passed a milestone of a journey to war in our past. Sixty-eight years ago, on December 7, 1941, we experienced the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the greatest threat to our security in the history of our nation. Are any of you Pearl Harbor survivors or family members? Are any of you veterans of WWII, or wives, girlfriends, daughters, grand daughters?

I went to Hawaii with a friend. She wanted to visit the Pearl Harbor memorial but knew that I did not want to go. I knew it would be a very difficult. But the first morning we were in Oahu, I told her I had an urgent feeling, almost a compulsion, we had to go to the memorial that day. It turned out to be a difficult, but necessary journey, and in the end, one with great recompense.

It is a fairly small and simple place. There is a building on shore, with a museum where there are models of the enormous ships, memorabilia, the front pages of newspapers, and many pictures. There is a theater where a documentary is shown with film clips of news reports. And there is a simple bridge memorial over the battleship the USS Arizona, which still lies on the floor of the harbor as a memorial to the 2402 servicemen who perished that day. This is a picture of the memorial.

When we went through the museum, I cried. When we watched the documentary, I cried. I confess to God and to you my brothers and sisters, I experienced complete despair. Then a docent spoke to us. With his veterans of foreign wars hat filled with pins, Master Sergeant Richard Fiske thanked us for coming. Then he said that us after serving in three wars, he wanted to tell us who the true heroes were and are: the mothers, wives, girlfriends, sisters, and daughters who take care of everything at home. It was profound, a humble, gentle, hero.

Then we went on to the memorial representing all the brave souls and lost lives, the ongoing futility of war, human stubbornness, and stupidity. I cried. This was truly a long and difficult journey. But when we returned, Richard helped us off the boat and God gave me the recompense.

I thanked Richard for what he said about the true heroes and for his service. I told him that his humility and sensitivity had truly touched me and made a long difficult journey bearable. He asked if we would like to see his scrapbook. This is a picture of us with Richard. Then we got to hear about Richard's journey, his life, his vision, his love and passion, and his recompense.

On the first page of his scrapbook was a photo of him and a friend out having fun on December 6, 1941. The story Richard told us about

December 7 on the battleship USS West Virginia included incredible acts of courage. A Captain who defended his men up until his last breath, a Lieutenant whose actions saved the ship from destruction, and a cook who moved the dying captain to a safer place and then manned an antiaircraft gun despite having no training.

But the second page of his scrapbook was a letter from his father to his mother, [hold up letter] cut up with pieces missing to remove any information that might compromise security. On December 7, 1941, all three of the men in her life, her husband, and both her sons were on three different ships in Pearl Harbor. The letter was dated a few days later. It said, “Dear Marge, hope you get this letter soon, saw both the boys, we are all alive and fine.” Marge received the letter in March. The letter was her recompense for a three month journey during which she did not know if any of them had survived. Richard said, “Mom was a hero.”

Richard’s journey continued through the wars at Iwo Jima, and then in Korea and Vietnam. He served his country as a bravely and faithfully in three wars. But then his journey went a different direction. Richard told us about blowing taps at a memorial service in Hiroshima, about helping to repatriate the remains of missing airmen, who had been buried and cared for in a cemetery for 50 years by families of villagers who died in the same

bombings. He told us of bringing Japanese pilots to the Pearl Harbor memorial to apologize and repent for what they had done. And Richard told us he was now engaged in the most important work of his life. He said, I am 80 years old, but I have dedicated whatever is left of my life to building a bridge of understanding between the survivors of Pearl Harbor and the Japanese pilots.

He said, I want to tell you what I have learned. I am proud to have spent my life serving my country. We have the strongest military force in the world. But it is nothing compared to love. Love is the strongest force in the universe. I cried but this time, the tears were not despair. I felt the strength of his conviction, and I knew he was right. Love will conquer all evil, love is the journey's beginning, purpose and end. This knowledge, this enlightenment, was Richard's recompense for a long and difficult journey.

And meeting Richard was my recompense. I know this because of the situation. Remember I said I did not want to go but felt compelled? We were to be in Oahu a week, but had to go to the memorial that day. Richard only volunteered one day a month, the day we went to the memorial. I know God took me there to meet Richard and to know the story of his journey so I could share it with you.

Today we remember Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, the place where the life journey of Jesus began. Jesus was a man who shared life with us. He understood, and showed us how to grab the joy and weather the deepest sorrows of what it means to be human. An incarnation of God – Emmanuel, God with us; God walking with people then as God walks with us today, sharing the joys and challenges of the journey.

God, and Jesus, know that there is evil in the world. But Jesus came to tell us the prophecy has already been fulfilled and the kingdom is among us. He calls us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to build up the ruins, to change our world.

And God will faithfully give us our recompense, for we have an everlasting covenant, we are a blessed people. The kingdom is already among us. Love is already among us. The most powerful force in the universe is not our military. It is love, and it is our recompense for the long and difficult journey. Amen.