

Invitation to a Journey

The Rev. Glenda
Simpkins Hoffman

John 1:1-5, 10-18

Sermon Series:

*How do we
arrange our
lives to
experience the
abundant life
and delight
that God has
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Journey of Desire: This is the first Sunday of the New Year. Many of us traveled over the past few weeks to be with family or friends. You know, there is a lot to be done to get ready for a journey. But have you ever considered that every journey begins with desire? We have to have a desire or a vision of where we want to go, whom we want to be with, and when and how we will get there.

Journey of Descent: But that vision or desire has to be followed by intentional planning and preparations for the trip, which I personally regard as the journey of descent. First, we have to count the cost of time, energy and finances. And then, we have to make arrangements for travel, accommodations and other details related to where we are going. But we also have to make arrangements for here—being away from work, our homes and other responsibilities. Finally, we have to pack and gather together what we want or need to take with us. I confess, this is the point when I often want to abandon the whole idea of going anywhere, because it seems like more work to leave than to stay right where I am.

Journey of Delight: What keeps me going is my desire—the longing to be with the people I love, to share new experiences and see new

vistas that I have never seen before. And what I find is that once I get past the initial descent of arranging my life so that I can travel and actually get going, I experience the journey as one of delight. The joy of time away in a different setting with loved ones is a blessing and fulfillment of the deep desires of my heart.

I share all this because the metaphor of a journey has often been used to describe the Christian life. But for many, our spiritual journeys receive much less attention than our travel plans. We don't have a clear vision of where we are going, spiritually speaking. And, we often don't know where we want to go or what we want to see or experience in our lives in general or our relationships with God and others. Even if we do, some of us don't really know how to get there. How do we arrange our lives to experience the abundant life and delight that God has promised? Some of us have attempted to live differently, but the descent into trying to make it happen has bogged us down, so we have abandoned the journey because it's simply too much trouble. I know I have felt that way. Sometimes staying on the familiar path, even if it has become a rut, is just easier.

God's Journey of Desire: But maybe after this Advent and Christmas season you find yourself longing for more. I know I do. Maybe

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because I have been thinking about the spiritual journey, I noticed that the Christmas story is about many people's journeys to God—Mary, Joseph, shepherds and the wise men all arranged their lives to welcome and worship the newborn king. It wasn't easy, comfortable, or convenient, but it was good, and there was joy and delight.

But the journey that really stands out at Christmas is Jesus' journey, and nowhere is that more beautifully and eloquently described than in the opening of John's gospel. In the incarnation, the God of all eternity takes on human flesh. The incarnation is the journey of God to us. Verse 18 makes clear that God's journey began with desire. Did you hear it? "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

God's desire was to be known. God created us in love to know Him and to experience His love. He went to great lengths to journey toward us, to come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is Emmanuel—the God who is with us—the one who has broken the barriers of sin and made God known to us.

God's Journey of Descent: But in order for this to happen, God had to take the journey of descent. John writes in verse 14, "And the Word became flesh and lived for a while among us." Here is the Word incarnate. God takes on flesh, our

very nature, upon Himself and chooses to share our human weaknesses, struggles and suffering. God has chosen to dwell among His people in a very personal and intimate way, in the Word become flesh.

God's journey of descent is beautifully illustrated by C. S. Lewis in the *The Grand Miracle*. He writes: "In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down, down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity...down to the very roots and sea-bed of the Nature He has created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him.... One may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both colored now that they have come up into the light; down below, where it lay colorless in the dark, he lost his color too."

The message of the gospel is about God's journey toward us. The message of the gospel is that God loves us. He loves us so much that He, the Creator of the universe, stripped Himself naked and emptied Himself, taking on our very nature, and crashed into our dark, cold,

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cruel, and sinful world so He could die on a cross in order to pay the penalty for our sin. Jesus is the one who, for our sakes, lost his color too.

God's Journey of Delight: Why, why would he do all this? Because we are God's delight. He created us to live in loving relationship. Verse 12 makes clear that through faith in Christ, we cannot merely know about God; we can know God as His children. Through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, Jesus made it possible for us to be in a relationship with God. As His children, we bring God joy and delight. Isn't that amazing?

God's journey of desire was for you, His descent was because of you, His delight is in you. Advent and Christmas are wonderful opportunities to explore God's journey to us in the incarnation and how that impacts our everyday, ordinary lives. But a new year is a great opportunity for us to contemplate our response. How will we respond to God's invitation to a journey toward Him? We, as a congregation, have been on a journey for the past year-and-a-half as we have walked through God's Big Story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Essentially, God's Big Story is the story of His journey with His people over time. In this new year, we are turning the page to a new chapter in the story, if you will, as we move from the overview of the Big Story to look at a particular church in a particular place at a

particular time. Paul's letter to the Colossians gives a wonderful description of the spiritual journey that is relevant not only to God's people then and there, but to us right here, right now—both individually and collectively. In the coming months, we are going to explore this letter and the Journey of Transformation.

A Journey of Desire: But today, I want you to consider how you will respond to God's invitation to journey with Him in this new year.

Rather than making resolutions as many do this time of year or thinking about what you should do, I encourage you this year to attend to your desires. Ask yourself, "What do I really want?" If you learn to be still and know that God is God and attend to your desires, you will discover that under every human desire—even a distorted one—is a deep desire for God that only He can fill. Our desire for God—to know Him and to experience His love and to share His love with others—can keep you going on the journey of transformation in this next year and beyond.

A Journey of Descent: After we have named our desires, we need to name where we are and how we are going to get to where we want to be. Another way of saying this is: "How will I arrange my life to live into my desires?" The first act of the journey of descent is to let go of any idea that you can make this happen by your own effort, your own human striving. The journey of transformation is completely dependent on God's grace that comes to us in

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Christ. "Grace is God accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish on our own."

While we can't bring about what we want by our own human striving, neither are we to simply sit around and wait for it to happen. There are things we can do. It takes prayerful, intentional action to respond to God's invitation and to cooperate with Him in the transformational journey. So that question again: how do I arrange my life to live into my desires? What might that look like?

For all of us, there is a next step in our journey of transformation. For some, this may mean taking that first step of the journey by acknowledging your sin and trusting in Christ.

For others, it may mean committing to grow in your relationship with God. A new year is a great time to start new patterns for living. You may want to spend more time enjoying your relationship with God through prayer, reading the Bible and having daily devotions. We have a devotional guide on Colossians to complement the sermon series on the Transformational Journey, which we hope will help you live into the journey of transformation this year.

A new year is also a great time to start sharing the journey with others in a small group or attending a class. We are not meant to journey alone, because God can only be known and His love experienced in community. There are many opportunities listed in the

bulletin. Please take this home and read it. Prayerfully and carefully consider how God is inviting you to respond to His invitation to a journey. I really don't know what it will mean for you to individually arrange your life to live into your desire so that you can experience the fullness of Christ's love and joy, but it will mean going out of your way and doing something different.

A Journey of Delight: Psalm 16:11 says, "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore." What that means is that only God can satisfy the deep desires of our hearts. Each of us needs to trust the Lord to show us the path of life so that we might find fullness of joy. I know from experience that he will.

I want to share a personal story that I shared at the women's retreat last year, but it came to mind again as I was preparing for this sermon. The summer before we moved to Vienna, I went on a silence-and-solitude retreat because I really felt the need to hear from God. I was gearing up for another fall season in the church, and I felt a restlessness in my soul. I wondered how God wanted me to live and minister in that church year. I didn't want to just get through another year. I wanted the Lord to lead me in a way that would make the coming year different or distinct from the previous nine years of ministry.

St. Mary's of the Lake in Northern Illinois is one of my favorite retreat centers, and I always look forward to the hour-long walk around the lake each day I am there.

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I have walked around that lake dozens of time in the 15 years I have lived in the Chicago area, but on this particular occasion, I noticed a path I had never seen before, and because I had the time, I decided to follow it to see where it would lead.

Shortly into this path, I came upon a rickety, wooden bridge over a creek. I wondered if I dared cross it, but I decided that my desire to discover where this path led was greater than any risk.

After crossing over, I found myself face-to-face with a doe only a few feet away. The quote by Parker Palmer that had been read earlier that morning immediately came to mind: “The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, self-sufficient. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy, just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently by the base of the tree, and fade into our surroundings, the wild animal we seek might put in an appearance.”

I sensed that this path, this journey into the woods, this experience of silence and solitude was leading me to a place where my soul could hear and experience God. Eventually the path led to an open, grassy knoll by the side of the lake. And there, in the most unexpected, surprising place was a park bench inviting me (and whoever might

come this way) to sit and rest and to drink in the scene before me.

It was a beautiful scene. This little finger of the lake was so quiet, so peaceful and so serene. And just off in the distance, but not too far, was one of the spectacular bridges—clay red and earthen white with crosses marking it.

I sat down on that bench, and I was truly overcome by the beauty of this spot. I kept saying to myself, “I can’t believe I never saw this path before. I can’t believe I never experienced the beauty of this place before.” And suddenly, I had a deep awareness of His presence, and I was overwhelmed with a sense of joy and gratitude and delight. I sensed the Lord had led me on this little journey on this path. He didn’t have to give me that experience, but He did. I had to be willing to follow that path by getting off the familiar road to the road less traveled, but I discovered it did, indeed, lead to joy and delight.

I don’t have time to share the details, but that experience was a gift in preparing me for the transition and my life and ministry here in Vienna. That experience helped to clarify God’s desire for us and the desire He wants us to have for Him. God wants us to know Him and His love. That happens as we spend time with Him exploring the inner terrain of our souls. But that inner transformational journey is meant to impact the way we live our lives. He wants us to be willing to cross over bridges and boundaries and barriers of all kinds to carry His love to others in this place and around the world.

I hope you will take time to carefully and prayerfully consider how God wants you to respond to His invitation to a journey.

Friends, I share my experience with you because it is a new year. Two thousand and ten can be just another year, another lap in the rat race of life. Or it can be a transformational journey that leads to a deeper experience of God's love for us, a deeper experience of the abundant life Christ promised.

There are paths to notice and take, experiences to enjoy with God and others, and spiritual vistas to see that are yet ahead in this next year of life and ministry. And that's why I am so excited about 2010 and what we have planned as a congregation with this new sermon series, small groups, classes, our Sacred Rhythms congregational retreat in March. These are not just one more thing to do on your never-ending check list of things to do. These are ways of arranging your life to experience the joy and delight of an ever deeper journey with Christ. I hope you will take time to carefully and prayerfully consider how God wants you to respond to His invitation to a journey.

During communion, you will have time to do just that. As the music is playing, we encourage you to reflect on this invitation to a journey. Ask yourself the questions you will see on the screen:

What do I really want? How am I longing for God?

How will I arrange my life in 2010 to live into these desires?

Write down your response on the card provided for you, put it in the envelope, and then seal it. Please drop it in one of the baskets positioned at each door. In a month

or two, probably just before Lent, we will mail these cards to you as a reminder and encouragement to continue the journey of transformation.

I hope and pray 2010 will be the year that finds you on a path that leads you to a deeper experience of God's love for you.

