

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12]

I don't know how many of you have made a "pilgrimage" in your lifetime – going on a long journey to a sacred place that is important to one's belief and faith. For some it is Rome or Lourdes or the Holy Land; for others it is Graceland or the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

Back in June of 1982, only one month after my priestly ordination, I travelled to California and stayed with a college classmate and friend of mine. The visit included a tour/pilgrimage to Universal Studios in Hollywood. There I found and touched the side of one of the three DeLorean cars which were used for the movie trilogy, "Back to the Future." AND I got the autograph of Walter Koenig, who played Chekov on Star Trek. He signed a souvenir clipboard which I used to compose my homilies for the first ten years of my priesthood. This was before computers, when I had to hand-write all of my homilies! He wrote: "Wishing you the best of all worlds... And I'm sure you know which one that is!"

A pilgrimage involves both time and space. It involves traveling from one location to another, generally of some distance, usually over a long period of time. For the pilgrim, the travel time can offer an opportunity for prayer and reflection, and the distance often requires penance and pain of some kind, even if the mode of transportation is convenient. Pilgrimages have been with us for centuries, even for thousands of years. We are a "Pilgrim Church" still on the move!

Every year on the feast of the Epiphany, Polish cities get flooded with joyful Three Kings Parades. Designed as theatrical performances that recall the historical event of Jesus' birth and the visit of the Magi who worshiped him 2,000 years ago, the parades familiarize their audiences with the Gospel tradition.

The Magi come to the manger on pilgrimage as pagans. They search for truth and beauty, and they find God. This is the message of that pilgrimage: to commemorate their search and to reach all -- believers and non-believers.

The Magi, thanks to their reason, discover that something important has happened. From the very beginning, Poland's Epiphany parades commemorate God's love for every person in the world. Everyone can fit around the manger.

And show the light of faith to the world! Even you and I have a place and can fit around the manger! Today's feast of the "epiphany" or "manifestation" of God to all peoples challenges us to show the world the light of our own faith.

With the birth of Jesus Christ, a fire has been lit of love and compassion, peace and justice for all people. The Feast of the Epiphany shows us that Jesus has made the fire of faith and hope available to all people who seek it, who embrace it, who live it in their daily lives. Like any fire, that which has been entrusted to us by Jesus must be tended or else it will go out and be extinguished. If the fire is not available for everyone, then it will burn for no one.

And here is something about the Epiphany that we may not have known. Our pilgrimage works both ways in this case. We not only journey to God, but **GOD IS ON A GREAT JOURNEY TO US!**

The humility by and the great lengths which Jesus has taken to come to us, to become one like us and among us, and to show Himself to us, and the great lengths He will continue to take in His three years of public ministry which will lead to His passion, death and Resurrection.

As we see the greatness of Jesus' journey to us, as we reflect on the greatness of the journey of the Magi, what are the ways that the Holy Spirit is moving US to continue OUR great journey, in this life and the life to come? What gifts do WE bring this day to the stable and place before the Lord and King? Let us bring the gold of our material wealth and physical possessions; the incense of those Spirit-moments and God-moments of our lives; the myrrh, the funeral oils of our suffering and pain, and lay it before the Lord. How far will YOU go? Keep the flame of your faith alive as you and I continue our earthly pilgrimage with our eye fixed on Jesus... and on Heaven!
AMEN!

[Readings: 1 Samuel 3:3b-10, 19; Ps. 40; 1 Cor 6:13c-15a, 17-20; John 1:35-42]

There are all kinds of calls going on in the readings today -- and all kinds of people who respond in different ways. Sometimes people are being called clearly, sometimes not. In one case, God is doing the calling; in another, someone is calling on God's behalf. And in between the callers and receivers are people like you and me -- intermediaries -- who act either as a clear conduit or as a telephone operator helping customers with a call.

How am I like Samuel? Am I unsure of something in my life right now but unclear on which way God is telling me to go? Besides God's voice, what other "voices" are competing for my attention as I make decisions -- voices that represent the expectations of parish, family, and friends? Voices from my past? Voices of guilt, fear, or selfishness?

Today's scripture passages involve two fateful introductions: First Samuel, a future prophet, meets the one true God whom he will serve his whole life. And then two disciples of John the Baptist have their attention directed toward an obscure local teacher whom their own famed teacher terms "the Lamb of God."

An introduction is not all there is to these encounters. Once an introduction is made, it's up to the parties involved to follow through to real relationship. Though just a boy, Samuel takes direction from the old priest thoughtfully. The voice is strange to him, yet he offers to listen, to pay attention --the technical word here is to obey. Because he's so willing to attend to God the stranger, Samuel will foster a lifelong relationship with God who is Lord, guide, and companion. As a result, Samuel becomes the most effective judge who ever exercised leadership in Israel.

The disciples who depart from John and approach Jesus make the same choice. They ask where this teacher is staying in a bid to join his school wherever it gathers. One of my favorite verses in the Gospel involves a question and an answer: "Rabbi -- where are you staying?" "Come, and you will see." Where is Jesus "staying" in YOUR life? Is He a welcome guest? Are you bold enough, courageous enough to "come and see" what Jesus has in mind for YOU?

“Stay” can also mean “live” and “abide.” Where does Jesus stay, live, and abide, in your life? And a follow-up question: Is there a “right time” to be called by God? Yes, there is, and the time is right now! Regardless of who you are, where you’ve been, or where you are going, God calls you in this very moment.

What does it mean to be called by God? It means that God desires to connect personally with each and every one of us and that our whole life is a response to God. We commit ourselves to a life relationship with a person, a family, or a community, do we not? We seek education in order to prepare ourselves for a certain form of service in the world, do we not? We build a career using the gifts and talents we have been given. In our work, at school, in our family, in our relationships. If they lead us toward God, they are of the Holy One. If they lead us away from God, they are of the Evil One. And we freely choose which One we are going to follow and serve!

In these and other ways we give our lives to God. There are also smaller but no less significant choices we make day-to-day in response to God’s call: a kind word to a colleague, an opportunity to enjoy the rain (but NOT the snow when it comes with ice!), an extra effort to make a good project great. The key is to be open to God’s invitation to connect with God here and now. In this way, we open ourselves to think, feel, and act from a graced place.

It can be helpful to have a spiritual friend or mentor with whom you can talk about calling and also to read the stories of how others have been called by reading the lives of the saints. Parker Palmer says that a vocation to the single life, the married life, the ordained life, the religious life, doesn’t come from our own person willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to and reflect upon the experiences of my life and try to understand what it is truly about. Or else my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my expectations. “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” “Glorify the Lord in your body.” “Rabbi, where are you staying? Where do you live? Where do you abide?” “Come, and you will see.” AMEN!