

*A sermon for the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the Third Sunday of Advent, 13 December 2009. To God be the glory.*

It was 486 miles, starting in Roncesvalles and ending in Santiago, 23 days later. I took three buses, each about 10 kilometers, but other than those, I walked the ancient way known as the Camino to Santiago. Stories abound from this sabbatical-trek across Spain, but one, at least for today stands out. I fell in with a group of Germans. All of us were strangers to one another, until we shared an evening meal, a couple of prayers, and the beginnings of our stories. At an outdoor cafe in a village just west of Pamplona, each of us talked about why we were doing The Way, as it's called. Our spiritual discoveries, at the journey's end, however, were very different from what we had intended.

You will remember that the earliest followers of Jesus were not called Christians. They were called followers of the way. Jesus certainly heard the term The Way in the scriptures of Isaiah and Zephaniah and other prophets who announced "Prepare the Way of the Lord." John the Baptist used this phrase, taking it from their ancestors in the faith, and in his not-so-gentle preaching he reminded everybody they'd lost their way, and they needed to be found, rescued, patched up, fed, and led home. The very good news which John the Baptist preached was that God becomes the way through Jesus. That's the way with Jesus; he comes out to meet us and gives us something we need, his very self.

For those of you who have been in church for the last four Sundays have you noticed our preaching has been the bread and butter of Christian spirituality? Roger preached about Holy Scripture; then I suggested that Advent was a good time to foster more kindness; Scottie helped us to hear about repentance, that it means nothing more or less than to turn around. Today we focus on another basic, the call to cultivate joy. So we light a pink candle to signify this Advent turn. No matter how spiritual we might be, or how much theology we've studied, it's good to return to the basics, and joy is one of the basics.

Like every other aspect of God's self, joy can't be produced, or even stolen. We can't go to Target and buy joy on sale, despite what the advertising might tell us. We can't download it. We can't earn it because joy is God's expression which God gives to us.

If you've been around an Episcopal Church what I'm about to say might insult your intelligence. I don't mean to insult, ever, but I'm aware that ministers and lay leaders often use a lexicon (or still worse a bunch of acronyms) unknown to newcomers. In the Episcopal Church the governing board of a local parish is called the Vestry. Elected from the membership, vestry members, together with the clergy, lead the parish. At Epiphany, for example, vestry members begin and end each meeting with a prayer. Any prayer will do; it can be short; it can be long; homemade, or copied from another source.

At Wednesday night's vestry meeting it was Ted Kellogg's turn. And he began the meeting by reading that portion from Philippians we just heard.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

There was something about Ted's reading this, something about our being gathered around a table that moved me, deeply. As soon as Ted finished, Allen Hill, a vestry member, turned to me, and referring to St. Paul, said, "Man he wrote some great stuff! He wrote some terrible things too, but that was great!"

Paul did indeed write this, and he wrote it from a prison cell, awaiting a trial that could result in his death. Yet in this little letter the words joy and rejoice appear 14 times! Instead of giving up he wrote, "I press on...I can do all things through him who strengthens me." It's not simply the absence of concern, a kind of Greek apathy, or Eastern release from desire, it's the reality of joy, which he describes elsewhere as the peace of God.

The reason I wanted to walk the Camino was to be alone, and I was much of the time, but the grace of that journey was discovering joy. In the quiet. In the solitary. In the physical rigor of walking. In new-found friends. In a foreign language. I didn't catch joy once and for all; indeed joy is cultivated continually. And more and more, for me, I find it in my relationship with Christ, whose friendship is a primary source of deep, abiding fulfillment. Many of you have read Frederick Buechner; he's a great writer and a thoughtful, respected preacher. Let me conflate joy and happiness. Buechner comes to our aid by sorting out the difference. Happiness can come from things that we do, he says, a satisfying job can give us a sense of happiness, or a loving relationship. Money in the bank might bring happiness. A pleasant vacation or good health, those things evoke happiness. But joy is different. Joy is something that is as unpredictable as the one who bestows it. We can try to achieve happiness, but we can only receive joy.

When you wake up in the morning are you completely sure about things? I'm not. Sometimes there are questions, big questions, about faith and God, and about how to receive joy. But what I am sure about I draw from memory: of Jesus having been with me in so many ways in my life. Maybe so for you, too? I draw on my past memory and I draw on my present need...which brings me to an altar such as this with my hands cupped, almost begging to know God's joy.

God sends Jesus to find the way to us. And then patching us up, bridging the way to us and to God, comes this little bundle of joy. He's called Emmanuel, in whose birth God becomes one of us. And that's a lot of joy.