

Treasure Hunt

In my day every boy scout, even a tenderfoot like myself, had to learn how to use a compass. To insure our capacity to use this instrument effectively our scout leaders used to send us off individually on what was called a treasure hunt. In my case, I was taken to a fairly level stretch of Pennypacker Woods and given a compass and set of instructions directing me first to advance 150 paces north northeast where I would find a small envelope pinned to a tree. Finding it, I found instructions enclosed directing me to walk 100 paces southeast where I found a small box with further instructions – namely to walk 70 paces due west - and so on through many twists and turns until I came out of the woods precisely where I had entered. And there my scoutmaster awaited to award me my prize: a splendid compass of my very own. I must add, however, that as evening fell the woods around us echoed with the fading cries of other boys who had not read their compasses correctly and were never heard from again – ours being a very strict troop that had little patience for incompetent tenderfoots. Or tenderfeet?

Which makes me think: is not every Mass we attend a kind of treasure hunt? As our Liturgy begins, are we not all thrust back into Old Testament times as our starting point to experience (by way of the first lectionary reading) one or another of those signals given by God or an angel to ancient Israel – orienting us (as it did them) toward a Promised Land not far off? And having assimilated those Old Testament signals do we not then advance to find (by way of the second lectionary reading) bits and pieces of letters from St. Paul or some other apostle offering us further spiritual orientation – in the light of which do we not then advance to find a Gospel reading upon our path offering us an even more proximate sense of something wonderful ahead?

Consider, for example, this first week of Advent's liturgical treasure hunt where (thanks to its first reading) we stumble upon a note telling us “the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill a promise” – to make things sprout – like Springtime . . . like a rebirth, a resurrection, a blossoming of the human race! Thence we will advance but a few paces – guided by the compass of our liturgy – and come upon (perhaps stuck in the lower branch of a tree) a message left by St. Paul: reinforcing the promise of that first note, giving you instructions on how to handle what lies ahead: to “rev up” your capacity for love which the promise will expect of you.

Placing that note in your mental knapsack you will advance again but perhaps a score of feet when a third note will catch you eye (and ear) – a not entirely comforting note because, while it confirms the promise of the notes you have collected, it would warn you to brace yourself – because when that promise is fulfilled it will shake up your world in ways that may dismay you – saying things like: *it will shake the heavens and the earth, snap you out of your spiritual drowsiness, surprise you like a trap* – in other words; love will become your modus operandi – demanding - until you begin to love love. And so it will go throughout Advent and indeed the whole liturgical year – a perpetual treasure hunt with the liturgical readings as your compass - its orientations popping up from Sunday to Sunday. Leading where? To the promise you seek - the placing of that bread in your hand every Sunday whose nutrition, unlike the stuff you usually feed on, is inexhaustible and incremental