

Faith is often called a journey, and I know for me that is quite true. I was baptized, received my First Communion and was confirmed in the Catholic faith. But I also over the years questioned my faith at times. In high school, I had my doubts about even remaining Catholic at times. And in discerning my vocation, I had all kinds of things I thought about doing before I realized God was calling me to the priesthood. Today, while I'm an ordained priest, growing in my faith is something I try to do every day, because every time I offer Mass, I am reminded of two things: how much God loves me, but also that the love that I receive in Holy Communion also requires a response.

Some years ago, Beth Wood, a Catholic writer, was also on a faith journey, and it would continue later in her life with her son Will.

She remembers as a teenager, she once got out of the car as her 17 year old brother pulled into the church parking lot. "Hurry" he chided her. She rolled her eyes, jumped out and dashed towards the heavy, wooden doors. Sixty seconds later, she raced back to the car, a smile on her face, church bulletin clutched in her 14-year old hand.

Having the bulletin was proof for Beth that she in fact went to church. At home, she dropped it on the counter and headed up to her room so that her mom couldn't question her, as she wasn't a good liar.

Ten years down the road, she gave birth to her first child. Shortly afterward, her mom asked her when the baptism would be. She told her she hadn't thought about it yet. She just wasn't sure what she wanted for her own kids where religion was concerned. By the time her baby Will had turned one though, she decided that it was her job to instill some faith in him so that he'd have a basis on which to make his own decisions when the time came. So at 14 months, she had him baptized. Soon after, he was joined by a brother, and then a baby sister, both of whom were baptized within months of their births. Going to church had become part of the family's life. But when Will turned nine, his dad and Beth divorced. It was a tough time for all. She tried to keep a sense of normalcy in their home, taking the kids to church each Sunday, but her heart just wasn't in it, and neither were theirs.

"Why should I believe in God when He did this to our family? Will said to her one Sunday. His words mirrored her thoughts exactly. And Beth didn't have an answer. So, church became a holiday-only proposition. The kids attended the parish school of religion, but their attempts as a family at attendance were half-hearted.

When that nine-year old turned 13, they began preparing for his confirmation, which would signify him as an adult in the eyes of the church. It was his moment to affirm his faith. Will went along with the rest of his class, selected his sponsor, chose a confirmation name, and wrote the required letter to the Catholic bishop saying he wanted to be confirmed, all steps towards the big day. But just days before the ceremony, he began to tense up each time it was mentioned.

Finally, late one night, he came to his mom in tears, saying he did not want to be confirmed. Her knee-jerk reaction was anger. How could he back out now? Was he just nervous about his role in the ceremony she thought? All he had to do was to stand there and recite a few lines with several hundred other 8th graders. What was so hard about this? It was a tradition in their family she explained to him. She was confirmed; her mom before her was confirmed; and so were here parents before her. I can't let it end with you, she reasoned. He was adamant. And the more he dug in his heels, the harder she pushed.

They fought about it for days, and finally she called their parish director and apologized and explained. She listened to Beth vent her frustration and then she explained, "This sacrament is about choice. Typically kids this age don't raise much of a fuss because it's what they're supposed to do. The majority of them tend to go with the flow of things. The fact that your son is refusing is not a bad thing."

"It's not?" Beth was incredulous. She explained that this sacrament is meant to be chosen, not demanded. The fact that Will was choosing not to be confirmed meant that he was truly thinking about it, contemplating what it meant, and deciding that he wasn't ready.

Beth relented, and Will skipped the sacrament. But at the end of his 8th grade year, as his friends were preparing to head to the public high school, Will had other plans. He wanted to attend a Catholic high school in their area. Academically it was a great fit for him. Personally, Beth was thrilled. Carved above the front entrance of the school is a quote from the Bible: "Knowledge has built herself a home." In the center of the two-story building is a round chapel. Standing inside, they looked up to see the library, a circular path around the chapel, filled floor-to-ceiling with books. As a writer, Beth appreciated the coming together of the heart and the mind there, and Will simply nodded, having found his home for the next four years.

He had just started high school as Beth finished her story, which she wrote not too long after the family went to Midnight Mass. She watched as Will recited the "Our Father." He followed along, respectfully, throughout Mass, setting an example for his two younger siblings. Maybe, Beth thought, he has the same doubts as she did. Would he have run into church grabbed a bulletin - proof of attendance - just like she did at his age? Probably, she thought. But does that mean he has no faith? No, Beth realized. She believes in him, just as she believes in God. She can't always see his faith, but she know it's there. And maybe, all those years ago, she reasoned, her own mom may have known exactly what she was up to. Maybe she let it go, because she, too, knew that she would come around eventually, finding her own faith, just as her son was finding his.

This great celebration of Christmas that we celebrate each year is a story of how God finds us, wherever we are at. And no matter how long it takes, He will be waiting there too for us, never forcing Himself upon us, but welcoming us back home to him. Hopefully we want to be found.

God in His love, crosses time and space to become a little infant, a venerable human being born in a manger, becoming incarnate of the Virgin Mary as we say in the Nicene Creed. Our Gospel tells us of the angels appearing in the darkness, telling the shepherds “do not be afraid.” They are in literal darkness, so they have reason to be afraid. But then there is the emperor Augustus, who has a different kind of fear. He wants to assess the size of his empire, so has a census. The meaning behind the story is Luke who writes the Gospel is probably thinking of David, who counted his people which was a sin in the eyes of God. Of course censuses occur today all the time, but the meaning was He wasn't relying on God, he wasn't trusting and instead was worried about his kingdom, it's size, and his power. Like him, we too can cling to our power. And like the shepherds, we too can walk in the darkness. Not the literal darkness, but the darkness of becoming lost. For some of us it's some type of sin; perhaps a sin of habit, or something we justify doing though our conscience tells us it's wrong. Other times we just don't know where to go in life, so we chase the wrong things, putting a career, money, sports or hobbies ahead of God who we don't even think about. Or perhaps life just brings suffering, and like Will, we blame God for things that happen to us, thinking that He is the cause of our suffering, when we forget He is in fact our liberator. Whether you are afraid of your past, of your sin, of the future, whatever it may be, listen to the words of the angels and be not afraid.

The shepherds are shown the truth. And the truth is we are surrounded by a world of light, greater than any darkness. We cannot see it but we are promised light in our hearts. And the powers of this world are nothing compared to the great host which sings wonderful songs of peace to God for all time. They are an army which does not offer battle to enemies, but offers peace to all human beings who can receive their message of peace. So hear that message of peace. No one here is going to tell your mom if you in fact come by Saint Joe's to pick up a bulletin as proof that you were at church. But what we will be is happy you are here, but even more so than that, you will be giving yourself the greatest gift imaginable: a relationship with the God who is love, the God who will always be there for you. Know that whether you've been away a while or go every week, God is here for you, so let Him into your heart. Consider coming back to Mass. Pray a little each day. Spend time with the God who even if you were the only person ever created still would have come to show you how much you are loved.

And as you do that, bridge the gap between heaven and earth in your lives. This means bringing the values and the ways of heaven into the way we treat ourselves and others. Heaven happens on earth when we bring love where there is hatred and anger, justice where there is exploitation and greed, hope where there is fear and despair. Over the course of our lives, so many opportunities present themselves for us to do that. Looking for people who are lonely; not joining in bullying someone or reaching out to someone who is hurting; giving of your time to volunteer at a charity; or simply asking someone “how are you doing” as a question rather than a statement. Darkness for all of us at various moments in our lives can seem never ending, but we all have the power to bring the light of God's love into the lives of one another.

Lastly, be patient. We do not know the exact date of Jesus' birth, but it does come at a very dark time of year right at the solstice as the days are getting longer. Of course it's going to take a while for the longer days of summer to get here. And the same is true in our lives and the lives of one another. In our lives, we may experience setbacks or relapses into sin or old ways. Don't lose hope or get down on yourself, because God is always there for you. And perhaps like Beth, you know people you wish were more on fire for the faith. Well again, don't get frustrated. Keep encouraging others and believing in yourself, because God believes in you.

As a brother priest I know is fond of saying, Jesus is not the reason for the season - we are the reason for the season. Tonight we honor the birth of our Lord, but we are not meant to look back so much as to look forward. We are the reason for the season because despite humanity's sinfulness, God chose to do something about it - He chose to show us how deeply we are loved. So let that love fill your hearts and souls, knowing that while Christmas as a day comes and goes, the infant we look at in the manger now reigns forever in heaven and is waiting for not just in heaven, but is with you every step of the way on your journey through life. So bring him not gold, frankincense or myrrh but simply your heart and soul, letting Him into your life, and let His love change you so you too can change the world and proclaim to all in need, "be not afraid."