Scott: This week we find ourselves at the end of our Advent path. We have been anticipating the birth of Jesus for the past several weeks and has we have done so, many of us have been surrounded by our topic for today: family. For many of us, perhaps the holiday season is one of dread; for others it is one of joy; for others it is a stark reminder of a lack of family due to death or season of life. Regardless, we find ourselves ironically at a point in the liturgical calendar where family is all around us: in nativity scenes, in song, and in the flesh.

And isn’t that what this season is all about? In the flesh. The theological term we throw around is incarnation: the taking on of flesh by God, the joining of God with humanity, the message of God where God can say to our struggles: I know; Me too.

And yet, perhaps, again, ironically, our thinking of family especially at this point in the year is often static. We see the holy family in their moments of peace, when things have settled down in a moment of alignment: baby Jesus is still, the gaze of Mary and Joseph and the rest of the crew is one of anticipation fulfilled. More closely to home, perhaps, we reminisce of times gone by when life was easier, calmer, less chaotic. And we often yearn to go back to the moments; the good old days; the, often misremembered times when life was a portrait of expectations being met. Something static.

Our gospel passage reminds us that the spiritual life is anything but static. The characters we place in our nativity scenes, all of them, have taken journeys and will continue to take journeys long after the original day of incarnation. So we find Jesus and his parents being beckoned to a life of movement, of following the path before them, of life as journey.

Our gospel writer places us here as a reminder that the life of faith is always a journey. Matthew is not fine with taking us directly from Jesus’ birth to his death on the cross and resurrection. Although there isn’t much written about his youth, Matthew calls us into a story where immediate completion isn’t real. Life isn’t immediate completion; it is a journey.

Jesus and his family become refugees fleeing a political despot for the sake of Jesus’ life. Where do they flee? To the land which formerly enslaved their people. They take on the mystery of the journey, relying solely on the gifts of the Magi as their resources, not knowing whose hospitality would keep them alive. Then they return to the place of Galilee, a locale relegated by the majority of Jews as impure, accent-laden, and where nothing good could come. As a result, I have to imagine it was during this time that Jesus and the holy family began asking a lot of questions. I say this because Jesus’ 30 years of relative anonymity was followed by 3 years of all sorts of questions. Our gospels have 307 recorded questions of Jesus to others and of the 183 he is asked, he only gives 3 answers.

And so we want to focus today on these two aspects touched upon here: family and journey. We want to talk about how it is family – in all its forms – that acts as the vehicle for our spiritual journey. It is not one of stasis but of becoming and belonging. So here is a story about our family and its journey.

Melanie: Quick disclaimer, The story of our family’s journey is unique to us, We don’t hold ours up as a template or a how to but just another offering of how Christ has worked in our lives and has connected us with the lives of this community. There are many beautiful people in our church community whose stories more closely mirror the flight of Jesus and his family to Egypt. We are in no way comparing the hardships, pain and loss of those stories to our own.

Almost 5 years ago we were living in Phoenix NY which is about 30 minutes north of Syracuse. We were coming out of some disappointing years which left us wandering in what felt like a wilderness. We had a lot of questions and few answers. We didn’t have much clarity on where God was or where He wanted us. So we began praying and asking God to show us where He was working. I was ready to leave Syracuse completely and shake the dust off but it became clear that for the sake of our family and Scott’s new job opportunity, we should stay in the area. Sensing that our sanity, spirituality and faith depended on it, we decided to put our house on the market even though we lacked a clear plan.

We desperately wanted to find a place where we could do life with and alongside a community. Something we had glimpses of but had been lacking in various ways in our other endeavors. So we began looking for houses all throughout the surrounding suburbs but still nothing felt right. As we continued to talk through what we wanted and hoped for, the idea of moving into the city and partnering with a community based organization who had hospitality at the core of its mission, began to take shape. We reached out to our friend Nicole, who is the Exec Dir of the non profit, Hopeprint, on the northside who partners with refugee families post resettlement. We met with her for coffee and began imagining a life together with her, refugee neighbors and the rooted community of folks who call the northside home. At this point in time, we were already a family of 6. I was a stay at home mom who was also home schooling and planned to continue to do so after our move. We knew we were in need of a house and yard that would accommodate our family size and lifestyle. I even made a list of all things I wanted, including sidewalks and a central location. But if you know much about the northside, there are not an abundance of homes for sale that meet this criteria, as most are landlord owned. Just as we started looking, our house finally found a buyer. We were elated and essentially about to be homeless.

We finally stumbled on a couple of homes that looked like great opportunities. The first one, which was operating as a B&B, rejected our lowball offer outright and the other sold in the same day we were preparing an offer. I remember a strange feeling of disappointment while simultaneously thinking that something really remarkable was going to happen. It was a chance for me to flex my faith muscles. While at church the next week, I ran into an acquaintance and unloaded to her about our current situation. This was very unlike me because I’m not generally an open book in these contexts. After listening to my woes, my friend Carolyn, who works at the Rescue Mission, told me that she had a house on the Northside that was an estate donated to the Rescue Mission and they were preparing to sell it. She was heading there after church if we wanted to join her. We loaded our kids and drove into the city, and pulled into the driveway of a house on James St. It wasn’t quite on the Northside but it was within walking distance to Lincoln Middle School, which would be a perfect set up for us to tutor refugee students after school. As we toured the almost 100 year old house, which had a lovely yard and loads of character and potential, we knew this is where we wanted to be. It literally had everything on my wish list. There were of course obstacles to overcome: the house was initially set to be auctioned off which would have excluded us from buying it. But after clearing it with the D.A.s office, the Rescue Mission allowed us to buy it at the price that the auctioneer estimated it at. We also had to rely on the hospitality of others as we spent that summer sleeping in the homes of our friends as the timeline for the sale of our house didn’t match when our new home would be available.

As the date for us to move into our new home neared, our friend from the Rescue Mission, Carolyn, who knew the former owner, Millie, remarked to us that Millie, was known as a prayer warrior and frequently held prayer meetings in the house. Preceding her death, she had been praying that whoever purchased her house would be a family who would continue the work in the neighborhood.

In the years since then, our journey has taken many twists and turns. We had the honor of tutoring students for two school years and met some pretty amazing kids and volunteers. We also made lasting friendships with those who serve in the Hopeprint family. About 3 years ago we also decided to put our daughters into the city schools which has broadened our community involvement and made me a reluctant PTO mom. In our own little neighborhood, we’ve also had two families move in who coincidentally have daughters the same ages as our own. In our prayer of asking God where he is working, we were also lead to All Saints. Neither of us were raised in the catholic church, but we have found a home in this community where all are welcome and all are given a voice. In all my church years I’ve never been asked to give a message and while this may be the last time, I’m thankful for a church who sees and values my worth and will do the same for my daughters.

Scott: Hopefully, you caught some of the allusions to how our family has sought to live in to as we take this journey. We believe the spiritual journey is exemplified in the ordinary parts of life – putting dishes away, going to work, eating with others. It is the long game and therefore changes how we do and “measure” things.

We often think of these ordinary practices as the liturgy for the journey. It is one rooted in justice and love – our liberation is tied to the liberation of others and so we seek to do this liturgy alongside others.

The first practice is question asking over answer giving because it gives birth to listening. Ours is a world often committed to fast answers over slow questions. Answers portray intelligence and with it superiority and power. Questions create the space for something new to emerge. Answers, especially those that respond to our quick results, while satisfying, shut down the discussion, and the future shuts down with them. Questions with great power are ones that transform us into cocreators of our world. Through them we become actors in the drama of our lives. Passivity is removed and we are given agency. As soon as a question comes from our mouths and hearts, we have moved from mere spectator to participant. And at the core of this practice, we believe the encouragement and allowing of questioning is an act of ceding power. This is what the life of Jesus looked like: stepping away from violent power in favor of transformative love.

In the name of incarnation, of bringing this practice down to the ground, what does it look like in our everyday life as a family? It looks like The Meal Box – a deck of cards we received from All Saints. Every dinner, our oldest daughter asks a question from a card in the deck. It not only develops their question asking skills, but gives each of them a chance to become an agent in their own story and to listen to each other. Asking questions and listening: two skills needed for the spiritual journey.

The second practice is that of hospitality. Our world is often tempted to build itself off of scarcity and greed. We believe that life in Christ is one of abundance and there is always room for the other. We believe God is, in essence, hospitality and in a world often steeped in scarcity and greed, hospitality is resistance.

However, we, like the holy family, are often asked to be dependent on the hospitality of others, something we tend to find very difficult. As Christine Pohl has said, “The deepest condescension may be expressed in an person's unwillingness to be a guest - reflecting an unwillingness to recognize another person's capacity to help us...the pinnacle of lovelessness is not our unwillingness to be a neighbor to someone, but our unwillingness to allow them to be a neighbor to us.”

Again, in the name of incarnation, what does hospitality look like in real life? It looks like shared meals. This shouldn’t be too much of a surprise, after all Jesus didn’t leave us with a book or a set of rules. No, he left us with a meal. “The Eucharist most fundamentally connects hospitality with God because it anticipates and reveals the 'heavenly table of the Lord.' In that sacrament, we are nourished on our journey towards God's banquet table, even as we experience the present joy and welcome associated with sharing in that table. A shared meal is the activity most closely tied to the reality of God's kingdom, just as it is the most basic expression of hospitality.” If Jesus was labeled as a drunkard and glutton, we would do well to ask how well we mimic that.

A way we try to know whether or not we are eating with others – both at our table and theirs – is to ask the questions, “Do our neighbors know where our forks are? Do we know where their forks are?” These questions are just as theologically significant as a host of other core questions. It reflects relationship and dependency; frequency and intimacy. It is as ordinary as it is vital to life in Jesus.

Thirdly, we believe in prayer as an essential practice for the journey. We love what the Desert Fathers say. “What is pure prayer? Prayer which is brief in words but abundant in actions. For if your actions do not exceed your petitions, then your prayers are mere words.” Every evening at dinner, as well as other occasions, one of our girls will pray. We have found that their petitions for other people allows us to ask how they might be able to become the answers to those prayers. In a world often succumbing to the mere sentimentality of “thoughts and prayers” we want our family to seek ways to be the hands and feet of Jesus. In other words, we do the liturgy until we become the liturgy. So the practice here is: in what tangible ways are we becoming the answer to others’ prayers.

To that end, we want to leave you with a prayer that has been central to our family’s journey.

Melanie: This is the prayer that I send my girls off with each school year:

May the peace of Christ go with you, wherever he may send you. May he guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm, may he bring you home rejoicing at the wonders he has shown you; may he bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.