

A SONG FOR THE JOURNEY TO GOD

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Reign of Christ Sunday

November 26, 2006

Scripture: Psalm 132:1-18; Revelation 1:4-8

My friend Patrick Willson, pastor at the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church in Virginia, and a fellow member of the Moveable Feast study group of which I am a part each January, has written a paper that haunts me when I think of preaching on this Christ the King, Reign of Christ Sunday. I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to his thoughts and the role they have played in my thinking about the 132nd Psalm and what I will say about it today.¹

No one in this city misses the fact that Thanksgiving transitions in the twinkling of an eye into *Shopping Days Before Christmas*. We in the church may be singing “Crown him with many Crowns, the Lamb upon the Throne,” to remember the Reign of Christ, but the world is already humming, “I’m dreaming of a White Christmas.” We are so out of step, whistling a tune that no one is singing.

Black Friday has already passed and the crowds at the malls in the suburbs have been, well, mauled, and the holiday rush is now officially on. The Christmas tourists have invaded uptown and the carols are playing in every elevator and deli in the city. Santa, after all, *is* the last float in the parade on Thanksgiving Day and Macy’s would like us to follow him to Herald Square right after the parade.

Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday this year, and the pre-holiday run-up is shorter, so, maybe it’s inevitable that the merchants would rush us toward the season with the early carols and the Christmas preparations.

But maybe our spirits need it sooner too. It has been a long and hard year, what with the war raging on and the terror increasing and the options for withdrawing our troops over there getting more complicated. Maybe what we most need now are some of the comforts and consolations that Christmas brings.

The songs of the season always touch me, and one or two are so sentimental that they choke me with emotion. That verse in “It came upon a midnight clear”, that begins, “And ye, beneath life’s crushing load, Whose forms are bending low, Who toil along the climbing way, with painful steps and slow...” that one always gets me.

And who of us does not love that charming and sentimental song that promises,

I’ll be home for Christmas
You can count on me;
Please have snow and mistletoe,
And presents on the tree.
Christmas Eve will find me
Where the love light gleams.
I’ll be home for Christmas
If only in my dreams.²

I love that song. The longing for home, the ache and desire to be in a place that is safe and warm and secure, as when we were children.

The irony of that tune is that “I’ll be home for Christmas,” was a song written for people who knew they wouldn’t be home for Christmas. Recorded by Bing Crosby in 1943 in the midst of the Second World War, everybody knew that the words expressed a hope that would not be realized except in their dreams. Thus the poignancy of the last line.

There is something of that sentimental longing for home in the 132nd Psalm read today. It is one of the pilgrim psalms, as they are known, a song for people on their way, people who wanted to get to God and who bided their time as they traveled singing the songs of faith that told their story and inspired them to keep on going. Like the slaves who labored in the cotton fields of the old South and who sang songs of freedom and spirituals of release in the midst of their servitude, the people Israel kept hope alive in song.

The book of Psalms is the Bible’s hymnbook. It contains the songs and thoughts of a nomadic people and the choruses of faith that reminded Israel who and whose they were even in captivity and in exile.

What do you sing when you are far from home, longing to return, on your way to God? The exiles of the captivity sang laments, plaintive songs full of questions. So in the 137th Psalm we hear, “By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. How do you sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”³ they asked.

In better days the psalmist of the 122nd psalm, reflects the hope and promise of arriving home once again when she writes of Zion, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord, Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!’” a chant written for people on their way to the Holy City, perhaps sung antiphonally as they climbed the steps of the temple in the City of David.

Israel’s songs, like the old spirituals got them through, held them together, sustained their hope, and reminded them of the Sovereign one who ruled over all.

Like “I’ll be home for Christmas,” the 132nd Psalm pointed Israel homeward in a time of exile and reminded it of those days when David was king, the golden age, a better day when Israel admired and loved its king, when it stood tall among its neighbors, and was a just and mighty power. A nation has times like that, times of proud accomplishment, and times of it falls gravely short of its highest and best; and don’t we know.

“Rise up, O Lord,” they prayed on their way, longing to return home, to a temple that no longer was and a city that no longer stood as they remembered. “Rise up, O Lord and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might.” It is a plaintive appeal to God that once they got home, once they were in the temple again, God would meet them there. For they had asked themselves the hard question, “*What if God is not there when we return? What if the ark of the covenant cannot be found?*”

They had reason to wonder, a basis for their anxiety. All the tangible and familiar symbols that indicated God’s presence were gone, erased by history, crumbled under

Babylonian dust. Israel's military might was but a memory, and foreigners ruled the land. David's reign was long ago, and seen through a hazy gauze of romantic lore. The Temple on Mt. Zion, the object of the exiles' longing was gone.

Like people returning to a burned out hillside leveled by wildfire, they hoped to sift through the rubble for a memento or two, a strong box, a framed picture, an heirloom locket, the gold base of the ark's feet among the dust of the ruins in that place that once was home, if only God would meet them there.

But they were haunted with guilt on their journey, fraught with worry, held back by "if only's." The Lord's promise to David, after all, was "*If only* your sons keep my covenant and my decrees that I will teach them, all your posterity shall sit upon the throne." But of course they had not kept the covenant, they had not fulfilled the decrees. They had not lived up to their side of the bargain. So the *if* of God's conditional promise explains a lot in the psalm. The *if* explains the ruin of the temple. The *if* explains the lack of a king. The *if* explains the fact that they were far from home.

And, of course, we understand the sadness of that as well. We know all about the *ifs*, and *if only's* in life, don't we?

If only I had gotten on that plane when I first heard about mother's heart attack, maybe I might have gotten there before she died.

If only we had not had the children so quickly, maybe we would have laid a better foundation for our relationship.

If only I had been less married to my work, maybe he wouldn't have been so interested in the one who stole his affection.

If only I had told my dad that I'm gay, maybe that emotional barrier that always stood between us might not have been.

If only I had had more money; if only I had had better looks, or were younger, or were older, or had gone to Yale instead of Penn, whatever it is I didn't do or don't have, it might have been different, *if only*.

As a nation we put ourselves through this as well. If only we had lived less in fear and more in faith, if only somebody had checked more closely those claims of weapons of mass destruction, if only somebody had said "Stop!" at Abu Ghraib, if only we had been as interested in education and health and meaningful work and human development as in the Middle East we were in oil development... maybe... if only...

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the pilgrim's road to God was potted with *ifs* and *if only's*. But as it is with us, so it was for them. There was no going back. All of us must come to terms with the fact that we cannot reshape what has been, except as we take hold of today and mold it for tomorrow.

They kept on traveling, those exiles, working their way toward God, hoping against hope that they might yet return to Jerusalem, in body and spirit, and that once they got there God might be forgiving.

Just when the psalm seems most plaintive and sad, filled with the pathos of what might have been, a voice interrupts the reverie and rises above the chorus. It is not the

voice of judgment or condemnation, it counsels no regret and signals no fury. It is the voice of God that sings the final verses of the psalm, the basso profundo whose aria the chorus has made ready.

The voice of God sings of faithfulness, “The Lord has chosen Zion... This is my resting place forever; here I will reside, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless its provisions, I will satisfy its poor with bread. Its priests I will clothe with salvation, and its faithful will shout for joy.”

This is the voice of the assurance of pardon, the welcome of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, the one who embraces his wayward child and who places the family ring on the boy’s dirty finger. It is the voice of the God who knows us through and through and loves us still and all.

“Here I will make a home,” God declares. “*Here* I will dwell forever, for I have desired it.” And suddenly all the *what ifs* and *if onlys* no longer count against the record, all the time spent in exile seems as if it can be left behind, for all is made new and whole in the welcome extended by the Holy One of Israel.

And why? Because, as the psalmist says, in the voice of God, “I have desired it.” No other reason need be given, no other reason explains more. God longs for reunion, longs to be close to us. God longs for us even more than we long for God.

And we have longed for God, haven’t we? We have spent much time wandering to get us this far. I hear it every time we welcome a new class of members.

Someone will say “My parents dropped out in the 60’s and I had never been to church before in my life. I tried a bit of Eastern Religion. I’ve done some meditation. I longed for something more in life and found it here.”

Another will say, “I can’t explain it. A friend invited me to come on Christmas Eve and I sensed there was a special feeling in this place, a peace that settled in on me that the world cannot confer.”

Another will say, even in these latter days, “I came on 9/11 and sat in here and prayed, and it’s as if God got a hold of me somehow and has not let me go ever since.”

More than one will admit, “I never felt I could trust a church as such, so much judgment, so much condemnation, but I have come to know that I can trust in God, whose judgment is coupled with grace.”

In one way or another almost all of us can speak about our religious wanderings, our travels in a foreign land, our exiles and exoduses, and our longing for home to be in that place where who we are is welcomed, and all that we are is both forgiven and received.

Frederick Buechner writes in his book **Longing for Home**, a wistful reflection on what it is we are looking for in life. He writes:

We search for a good self to be and good work to do. We search to become more human in a world that tempts us always to be less than human or looks to us to be more. We search to love and be loved. And in a world where it is often hard to

believe in much of anything, we search to believe in something holy and beautiful and life-transcending that will give meaning and purpose to the lives we live.⁴

There are more than a few of us here who have spent many a long year wandering in a maze of side streets before finding our way to the fountain in the square, where God answers our longing to come home with hospitality; “Here I will make my home,” God says. “Here I will dwell forever.”

And where is that “here?” *Here*, surprise of surprises, is where we are, on our journey toward God, we who are seeking after the Holy. *Here* is in flesh and blood, in the company of those who yearn for God, the exiles and wanderers, the ones who stayed at home, the ones who ventured far, among them all God says, “Here I will make my home; here among you.”

It was T.S. Eliot long ago who suggested that, “the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know the place for the first time.” Sometimes in matters of faith that is precisely what we do, discover that the coal that we have held so tightly is really a diamond in the rough but when held to the light has many facets.

On this last day of the church year we remember the story of the journey we have undertaken, the wandering we have done, and the way that leads to God. It is God’s story and our story intersecting. It is the story of the place where we are going and a song for the journey we travel.

In the next few weeks the world will go mad for Christmas. The shopping and parties and merry making and overindulging on every level. We’ll get sentimental over the carols and misty over the egg nog. But at the heart of our Advent expectation and our Christmas celebration is a greater and deeper truth than is conveyed by what the world will do. Which is why we pause this final weekend in the church’s year, to remember Christ the King and the everlasting reign of the one who will come among us in flesh and blood, Emmanuel, God with us.

So how does the story end for people journeying on their way to God? It ends with the voice of the 132nd Psalm blending with the song sung in Revelation as the two become one, “I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end... Behold the habitation of God is among the people... For the Lord has chosen Zion, God has desired it for his habitation. God will abundantly bless its provisions; and satisfy its poor with bread. Its priests will be clothed with salvation, and its faithful will shout for joy.

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¹ Willson’s paper on Psalm 132, presented at the 2006 Moveable Feast, is unpublished.

² Words & music by Kim Gannon, Walter Kent & Buck Ram.

³ Psalm 136

⁴ Buechner, **The Longing For Home**. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996. p. 66-67.