

"Heading Home"

Introduction

What does heading home mean to you? Can you remember the times you have headed home, eager to be there? Christmas and Thanksgiving see millions of Americans traveling to be home for the holidays. I recall one Christmas many years ago, living in Tonga, I don't think Becky was born yet. 'Ofa flew, I took the ferry to get home for Christmas. Her sister and husband were living in Micronesia at the time, and she flew early enough to make it, but he had to stay and work a couple more days. Due to weather and flight cancellations it took him almost a week to get home. Actually it was kind of humorous to hear his itinerary, hopping around the South Pacific trying to get to Tonga for Christmas.

Heading home: does that mean going to the place where you truly belong? Think of the places you have lived and which felt most like home. When all is said and done, where do you and I belong?

Baptism and Exile

The Bible is written for people who are in exile. When we are baptized into the Christian faith, we enter a community that is in reality a community in exile, away from our true homeland. The Scriptures tell us, and thousands of years of Christian witness has demonstrated, that our true home is with God. [As we enter the 21st century in America it appears we are moving closer to exile conditions. The Christian faith no longer has a strong influence on the culture. Some would suggest that the government through the courts and public education has even turned hostile toward Christianity. The mark of the Christian community, exiles in this land, is still holiness. Scripture provides a road map for holiness.]

Baptism "is God's word to us, proclaiming our adoption by grace, and our word to God, promising our response of faith and love."¹ It becomes our model for meaningful living in the 21st century, calling us to a holiness that rejects the self-focused conduct prescribed in the myths of our culture. "Much of what baptism signifies, from the washing away of sin to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, will need to happen during the course of a lifetime."² For that reason God calls us to be on this journey to a life of peace in communion with God, as we are led to our true home.

Last week (at 11:00) we baptized our newest member. Each one of us in the congregation was reminded of their own baptism. We were reminded to again repent of our sins, and that we are to live lives set apart from the ways of the world, because we are headed toward our life with God.

At 11:00 today we will baptize two children. When a child is baptized the congregation serves as godparents to the child. The parents (and godparents or sponsors) promise before the congregation to nurture the child in the Christian faith and the congregation promises to help. The parents are responsible to teach their child to read the Word of God, to instruct their child in the principles of the faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to pray with their child, to make every effort to bring their child up to seek a relationship with Christ. The lures and glitters of the world will be enticing as they grow up.

One of the problems that faces the church in America, in these neighborhoods where most of our material needs are easily met, is that we can easily forget who we are and where we are supposed to be going. Some Christians wonder if they have not already found the Promised Land, right here on earth. Some have unconsciously substituted secular values of wealth, comfort, convenience, and self-gratification for Christian values of obedience to God, spiritual maturity, and self-sacrifice. They can become just too comfortable with this present

¹United Methodist Book of Worship, (Nashville, 1992), 81.

²Ibid, 81-82.

land. But the Promised Land is not here. It is in eternity with Jesus Christ. Instead of conquering our promised lands, the stories of the Bible give us a model by which to live in this world as we journey *to* the true Promised Land.

There was Joseph in Egypt; Daniel in Babylon; Nehemiah in Persia; and then the Christians of the first century, all kept the faith despite overwhelming odds and oppression. Closer to our day I think of those Africans brought to America's shores two centuries ago as slaves and their descendants who found salvation and comfort in Jesus, in the midst of terrible circumstances. I think of Native Americans who are believers, despite what they suffered through in the last centuries. I think of some of my ancestors who struggled through hardships, yet kept the faith. No doubt you have your own stories as well. Like other Christians before, though treated unfairly they refused self-pity. Though persecuted or put low they refused compromise. They worked hard, remained holy and obedient to the Lord, and left a legacy of holiness. Now it is our turn to follow their example as God leads us home.

Be Not Distracted

In his letter to the Christians at Philippi Paul says, "our commonwealth is in heaven." Some translations say "our citizenship is in heaven." What Paul means is that our inheritance, our true belonging, is there, with God. By and large most Christians agree with Paul, and in relation to that they speak about completion, fulfillment, and repeat the words at Communion about Christ coming in final victory. Nevertheless, many of us have difficulty balancing our faith in a "commonwealth of heaven" or "kingdom of God," with our life in society. Sometimes the distinctions get blurred in our minds or maybe we don't even notice a distinction. We sanctify our citizenship here, while trying to say it is there, in heaven, as well. Perhaps this tension is unavoidable. When we use sacred language to speak of the nation, country, or land, maybe we are trying to say that somehow the earth itself must be part of the heavenly commonwealth; that where we live and work and play must in some way also be sacred or holy. That is, of course, a statement of our mission, living in this outpost of heaven. You see, our real job is not just to get people to heaven, but also to get heaven into people. We are sent to be agents of change, bringing people to God, rather than agents who are changed by the cares of the world. But the danger remains that we will allow the nation and society be the standard to live by. We need an outside source, a revelation, to be our guide and standard for living. That standard is Christ. The nation may well be a penultimate good, but it is not the ultimate good. A "savior nation" usurps the role of our true Savior.

If our citizenship is truly in heaven, then we are living in the outposts, trying to make a life in conformity to God's country, even while in a foreign land, as it were. Yet do we, in our churches feel like an outpost in this society? Maybe Jesus wept over the fate of Jerusalem because he knew the people of that city had been given a mission. But the so-called holy city rejected and killed the messengers of God (including Jesus himself) believing it had the right to do so because it, more than any other place and people, thought it knew how God must act. Jesus tearfully wished he could gather the city under his wings, as a hen gathers her chicks, because he knew God would turn elsewhere. He, who loved the city and land most deeply, became the prophet who must pronounce her doom.

Will Christ pronounce our doom also? Yes indeed, if we become only a hollow shell of religion. The needs of the community around us to hear the Word of God, experience God's mercy and compassion, and to be brought into this outpost of heaven are greater than ever before. Our children are growing up in an increasingly godless world, where even the mention of faith in Christ is quickly derided in many circles.

During Lent we repent, we pray, we meditate on how we can be better examples of the presence of Christ in our world. The nation's redemption starts with each of us, one at a time. For "...our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ". This is where the "homeward imperative" kicks in.

The Homeward Imperative

Luke 13:31–35

Sometimes the choice of words can often make a huge difference in the message. In this reading from Luke a choice of words illustrates a clash of wills that we also face. In the original language of the Gospel (Greek) verses 31 and 34 have the verb *θέλω* which means “wish, desire, want, like, will.” It is used three times about three different people: Herod Antipas, Jesus, and Jerusalem. “Herod wants... I desired... you were not willing.”

Contrasted with that is one word in verse 33: in Greek it is *δεῖ*, which means “it is necessary, to have to, must, need, ought.” This word *δεῖ* is used in conjunction with obligations, duties, or a compulsion to do or try something. Have you ever had something that you just had to get done more than a strong desire? There’s that inner drive that pushes you on. Olympic athletes know about this; and you can think of many others. That inner drive can come into conflict with other obligations, desires, or opportunities. That means sacrifices will have to be made in order to fulfill that great drive. Yet there are things that must be and that must happen.

The necessity that drives Jesus isn’t a neutral, impersonal fate or simple inevitability, but the personal decision, the will of God. Jesus hears of Herod’s *desire* to kill him, he expresses his *wish* to gather Jerusalem under his wings, and the city *will not* respond to him. Despite that, it is imperative that He do whatever is necessary to follow his Father’s guidance “I *must* be on my way.” Jesus is expressing the divine necessity that takes precedence over these three different “wills” or desires. God’s *δεῖ* leads to and through Jesus’ crucifixion and, as Jesus says, “the third day I finish my work,” a reference to his resurrection. It is imperative that he be homeward bound.

[*Δεῖ* summarizes Jesus’ entire life and ministry. It starts with the 12-year-old Jesus who “must” be in his Father’s house (2:49). Then, because Luke also writes Acts, this necessity continues into the early church. Peter announces that Judas’ betraying Jesus was necessary: “Friends, the scripture had to be/*δεῖ* fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas...” (Acts 1:16). Paul recognizes the duty upon him to visit Rome (Acts 19:21). Within Luke’s gospel and Acts we perceive through his use of *δεῖ* the impulse and obligation upon Jesus and his believers to follow God’s path -- no matter what.]

The Christian life has sometimes been portrayed as hedged all around by duties and obligations. When that is the case it is no longer the Christian life, but legalism and moralistic living. Let’s be careful we don’t flip-flop Jesus’ good news into bad. Even what Jesus *must* do is good news -- for us and for our salvation. We can proclaim the high moral life of Christianity by emphasizing that we don’t go anywhere (morally or physically) Jesus hasn’t already gone. And though God’s will may clash with our desires, it is for something greater. If it is necessary for us, it was necessary first for Jesus.*

This thing “this homeward imperative” is in inside us, pushing us on to our true home in heaven. Some of you have seen the movie “Amazing Grace” about William Wilberforce and his life-long campaign to end the slave trade in the British Empire. He still models for us, 200 years later, citizenship in the kingdom of heaven living in the house of the unredeemed.

We must “stand firm in the Lord” as St. Paul says (Phil.4:1), finding our citizenship in heaven, rather than in the latest polls, trends, or fashions in society. Standing firm means neither doing it all ourselves nor leaving it all up to God . . . but partnering with God, through the Body of Christ, as “we eagerly await a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ.” We cannot stagnate or degenerate, but will continually seek to incorporate Him in our lives, making us ready to enter the citizenship for which we were created: citizenship of heaven. That is our true home. The homeward imperative pulls us there.

When we set our face toward our commonwealth which is in heaven, then the land, like us, can hope for the dawning of Easter. For our lives are brought to completion in Christ.

***Consider Robert Morrison. He was born in England in 1782. After a spiritual experience he dedicated himself to learning the Bible in the original languages and to train as a missionary. He studied medicine and Chinese. He was ordained a pastor and arrived in China in 1807. Except for two years back in England, he remained in China the rest of his life, dying in 1834. In his love for Christ and his love for the Chinese he translated the entire Bible, a book of hymns, and the Book of Common Prayer into Chinese, as well as writing a Chinese grammar and a three-volume Chinese dictionary. He founded the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca. For this amazing intellectual work Glasgow University granted him a Doctor of Divinity degree.**

Shortly after Morrison arrived in China, someone asked him if he expected to have any spiritual impact upon the Chinese. He answered, "No sir, but I expect God will." That was his intention and his method. He didn't make a convert in China until 1814, and after 25 years only ten were converted. He, however, understood himself to be living within a battle of wills and he would do what was necessary -- no matter what.

There was Semisi Nau: Tongan missionary to the Solomon Islands. He lived for seven months in a dugout canoe before a chief allowed him to come ashore to preach the gospel.