

Finding our Way Home – Brian Hartley

Psalm 67:1-7; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

I have a habit of getting lost. Give me a map any day and I can muddle my way through. But, absent such a man-made tool, I will usually wind up wondering where I went wrong. Such was the case the first time I can clearly remember losing my bearings. Wandering home from first grade, a book open in one hand and a satchel draped over my back, I glanced up to realize that nothing looked familiar. I went up one street and down another—all to no avail. Soon, a sense of panic began to set in as I contemplated eternal separation from those I loved—lost forever in the cold, dark cosmos. But, in the end, with the onset of dusk, an elderly woman came and rescued me from where I sat crying on the curb, called my grandmother, and I was safely driven home to supper. From then on, my father took it upon himself to try and point out landmarks around town in a valiant attempt to provide me with a better sense of my local surroundings.

I don't know if getting lost is a regular part of your experience, as it is for me. But what I do know is that that feeling of lostness can become pervasive for many of us, particularly during seasons of transition in our individual or corporate lives. Whenever we sense that change is coming and the familiar landmarks of life appear to be shifting, a sense of panic can set in. In John's Gospel, the evangelist pictures just such a time across a span of several chapters which he sets near the end of Jesus' life. For Jesus' disciples, though they may not have understood that their master's death was fast approaching, they knew that "something was up" and that change was in the offing. So, this lengthy narrative that stretches from chapter 13 through 15 is the writer's method of reaching out to those whom he loves, to try and provide for them a basis of hope during their time of disorientation. Perhaps these words have found their way into the gospel simply for that very reason: that, as later disciples reflected back upon their times of lostness they recognized in retrospect that Jesus was reaching out to them and trying to prepare them for what lay ahead.

May is, for many of us, both a time of celebration and of loss. For those of us in academe, it is the season of graduation and final grades. We wave good-bye to our now-grown tutelages as they hold on to their newly-minted sheepskin with one hand, while holding a handkerchief in the other. Tears flow naturally as graduates look down to see the ivy between them and their best friends physically severed. Such a decisive act makes all too clear for the first time that in a few short days they will be separated from friends and faculty on our little campus. For my wife and me, May brings with it the celebration of one daughter's birth, alongside memories of the loss of Darlene's mother and of our little girl, Hannah. The bursting forth of spring contains something of an edge to it because these twin emotions. Whether corporate or individual, moving through such times of change can challenge all of us. So, when we hear Jesus' words in chapter 14, "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid," we recognize, like the gospel's original recipients, that those words were not just meant for the disciples seated at table, but for

us, as well. He was not looking to simply take the edge off of their grief, but to share with them that a new reality was about to break into their lives—something beyond anything that they could possibly comprehend.

At the heart of today's lectionary dialogue stands the image of the Jewish temple. Originally destroyed in the sixth century BCE by the Babylonians, by Jesus' day the temple had been mostly rebuilt by Herod and was not only the center of worship, but the place where folks gathered and where everyday commerce took place. It stood as a monument to the glory of God, a symbol that though the Romans might occupy the city, Jehovah God still reigned supreme. But a generation after Jesus, the time in which today's passages would have been written, all of that was to change. The historian, Josephus, tells us that the Roman general, Titus, used the latest military techniques to put the city to the torch and, in fact, slaughtered so many people that blood filled the ditches and ran up to the horses' bridles. That is why on the 9th of Av, known as Tisha B'av in the Jewish calendar, all Jews remember what they call "the saddest day in Jewish history." Grief and lamentation mark this day when, just like I experienced on that day almost fifty years ago now, loss and chaos seemed my lot.

But this morning's texts provide something of an alternative understanding for those who would have lived through the destruction of the temple. Whereas in Herod's temple people were divided based on their class and status, in the heavenly city, pictured for us in the reading from the Revelation, we see only an "open door," an invitation to all peoples and nations to enter who claim the name of Jesus as Lord. In fact, one of the strangely missing elements in John's vision is the fact that there is no temple, "for its temple," he proclaims, "is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." There will come a day, we are promised, when people will simply be content to sit in his presence. One writer has even suggested that "to be this close to the center of God makes the temple redundant."

However, we live in the "already, but not yet"—this time between the loss of the temple and the coming of the heavenly city. Like the mood of the Psalmist we find ourselves occupying a place and time when we are grateful for what God has already done, yet look forward to that day when all will be set aright. We live in a kind of in-between-time when we have some idea where we've been and some idea of where we want to go, but are stuck at present living between the two. Many are content to simply sit and wait and see what will happen. Others want to get up and go somewhere, but aren't sure what to do or how to go. And underneath all the veneer, all the surface power stuff, most of us are very much afraid—much like the disciples in today's lesson. The neighborhood does not seem familiar and we are at a loss as to how to get safely home.

In the midst of this predicament, I'd like to suggest that John's gospel lection contains for us three promises that we can hold on to in this time of transition and loss. The first is the promise of Christ's presence. Though there are times in our lives when we long for solitude, most of the time what we long for is company and reassurance. During my time as a student here at Greenville, I rarely got a chance to go home—I didn't have opportunity and it was simply too far

away. But those few times when I did get in the car to drive west on interstates 70 and 44, I knew that the toughest stretch of road lay between the doors of Hogue Hall and the gates of my grandparents' farm in southern Missouri. Driving 55 miles an hour with no air-conditioning, those five to six hours just to get midway to Oklahoma City could seem interminable. But then I met this vivacious brunette from Indianapolis who would accompany me on that same trip. And, you know what? The time just flew by! Why, we would start talking and laughing and singing along to the radio and before you knew it, we were there. In fact, I used to really treasure those times together—our cares and worries left behind, with just me and my beloved on the road of life.

Jesus promised his disciples that if they were faithful to him and obedient to his word, he would come and “make his home” with them. John Wesley discovered this reality 275 years ago this month as he sat in a prayer meeting in London on Aldersgate Street. The man whose gifts and graces had propelled him into prominent leadership positions at an early age, felt that in many ways he was a failure. He had tried to live the ascetic life and had been plagued by his own carnality. He had tried to be a missionary in Georgia and had had to flee the colony by night in utter disgrace. He was a broken man as he went to vespers that evening at St. Paul's. But, he was to leave the meeting somehow different and would spend a lifetime reflecting back on that experience in which he “felt his heart strangely warmed.”

In John, Jesus says, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” For Wesley, it took until his 35th year in life at that little meeting in Aldersgate Street to fully realize the truth of this text. For the promise of company depends on our willingness to love God and to obey Him. Unfortunately, many other things in our culture of continual distraction crowd out this “one thing.” And sometimes it takes our getting lost before we realize just how preoccupied we have become with the things of this world—so much so that we haven't made room for the Lordship of Christ.

The second promise he gives us for our journey is not only his presence, but his instruction. I was scared to death of Driver's Education. Where I grew up, most of the students learned to drive well before age 16 on some back roads or in some farmer's field. But I had had no such experience and very little comprehension about how a motor car functioned. So, on the very first day of class, our little group marched out to the parking lot, opened up the automobile, and coach threw me the car keys. He led me through the start-up procedure, shooting me a puzzled look when I asked where the key should be inserted. I carefully eased out onto the road and began to cruise down NW 50th street towards familiar territory. When asked to turn, I reached for the signal, fumbled, and turned onto the next street, forgetting to take my foot off of the gas pedal. Before I knew it, the car jumped the curb. I heard a screech of tires and coach jammed on the brake pedal on the passenger side, and my classmates collapsed to the floor in the back as we came to an abrupt stop in someone's front yard. Have you ever seen an athletic coach's face just after he swallows a chaw of Redman tobacco and is really, really angry? “Boy, who taught you to drive?” he yelled at me. “No one, sir,” I replied.

You see, it isn't enough to simply have an instructor with us, we have to have received some instruction, as well. And, according to today's gospel lesson, this is what God does for us. He says here that the Comforter does at least two things: he teaches and he "brings to remembrance." That power of memory is a sustaining one, bringing us up short at times and comforting us at other times. And it isn't just our own miserly private memory that is spoken of here—it is the collective memory of the people of God found in the pages of Scripture, discovered through the tradition of the church, and rendered effective through the reason of the community and our own faith-filled experience. And that collective memory is what helps us—particularly in the rough patches of life.

But, beyond either the promise of His presence or instruction, God promises to us this morning His peace. Those of us who lived through the sixties and seventies remember flashing the big-V sign and saying to one another, "Peace." We even had a special peace symbol that we would engrave into our surroundings. But that form of peace proved to be both transitory and illusive. In fact, a number of my friends emerged from that age of Aquarius a bit hung over from too much pot and booze and only more in debt and more depressed than when they started. No matter how many marches or sit-ins we participated in, no matter how much groovy music we listened to, no matter how many "far-out" encounters we had, they never filled the hole in our lives that we hoped would be filled—they never really brought about any sense of peace.

But Jesus says here point blank that the peace of which he speaks is different from the peace the world knows. Peace for first-century Palestinian Jews meant freedom from Roman captivity and the establishment of a Jewish kingdom that would wield power over others. When confronted by Pilate before being sentenced to death, Jesus commented that his kingdom was not of this world, so his peace was a different kind of peace than the world expects. The peace that he offers is a peace "in spite of." It is a peace that is found not in perpetual happiness, suggests the apostle Paul, but in grace-filled joy—a joy that the apostle to the Gentiles could even discover while in prison. Writing of this gospel passage, Fred Craddock says that, "the peace given is the confidence that God is God, that God loves the world, that God is for us, and that God makes that love real in acts of self-giving. Therefore, neither our pains nor our pleasures, neither our gains nor our losses are ultimate; they do not create nor do they annul the peace of God."

For those of you who follow the liturgical calendar, today is known in ecclesiastical terms as "Rogation Sunday." It was traditionally a time when the congregation would pray for God's blessings on the newly-planted crops and the barnyard animals. In the 16th and 17th centuries, oftentimes the entire congregation would literally walk the parish boundaries, pointing out the familiar markers which they had learned from their parents and grandparents. They would commit to memory certain rocks and trees, hillocks and valleys, meadows and moors—so that there could be a shared memory and embracing of common landmarks—so that, no matter what the circumstances, they would never feel lost. All of this was meant to recall the ancient Biblical practice: "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set" (Prov. 22:28).

Each generation was summoned to honor those boundary marks and to remember that the God who had been with them in the past was to accompany them into the future.

Those times when we feel lost, when nothing looks familiar and we are unsure what lies ahead provide us, today's Scriptures remind us, not with an opportunity for panic and fear but a place in which to experience anew the first love of God. Though we may not know what is going to happen next, we can, Henri Nouwen suggests, "trust that good things will happen if we remain rooted in the love of God." In times of change, we are not promised that all will stay the same, but we are promised the Spirit's presence, the Son's instruction, and the Father's peace. So, today, in the midst of this time of transition and uncertainty, let us recall these familiar landmarks. And let us remember that the God who brought Jesus Christ from the dead remains with us and promises to sustain us in our time of need. Amen.