

"THE ROAD GOES ON FOREVER" (final sermon) by:

Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson

Old Testament Scripture: Genesis 4:9-12; 28:10; 29:1

New Testament Scripture: Hebrews 11:8-16

In anticipating my journey into the land of the people of the east, and in trying to figure out what to say in a farewell sermon, I have given quite a bit of thought to the immense influence that journeys have had on our imaginations.

The greatest stories known in Western Civilization are concerned with journeys I think of Homer's, Odysseus, Vergil's, Aeneid, the journeys of Marco Polo, as well as the more recent journeys to the moon.

This morning we heard about Cain, Jacob and Abraham, all of whom are remembered partially by their journeys. Cain was a fugitive. His journeys are characterized by loneliness and despair. In contrast, Jacob's journey allowed him time to sleep and dream. He was not so concerned about his final destination that he was unable to enjoy and experience the awe and wonder of his present surroundings. But Abraham's journey is characterized as a passionate search for the city of God. If Cain was unable to sleep and dream, as did Jacob, because he was fleeing his past, Abraham would not allow himself any rest or peace on his journey, "for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

As I think of their lives, I am reminded of a poem that a friend wrote:

"Life becomes a journey/ Rather than a series of small races
And at last comes a desire to be/ Rather than to pretend."

I'm certainly not being original when I speak of life being a journey. Eugene O'Neil's play, Long days journey into night, evokes a Cain-like mood representative of how many people feel about life today.

For many people, life contains many "goodbyes" but few "Hellos". It is a journey into the darkness and oblivion of the grave. When Thomas Wolfe entitled his famous novel, You Can't go Home Again, he was expressing a mood that many of us have had, at one time or another; that life is a journey that takes us farther and farther from home.

We are truly related to Cain. He is driven from his farming into a wandering and fugitive existence, away from the presence of God, in a foreign land.

We also have been driven from our homes. There is no way to return to the land of memories. We, like Cain, are fugitives in time. We are forced to go forward and never allowed to go back. We cannot stop the clock for a moment's rest. We are relentlessly driven into the future, and every moment is a step into eternity.

Many modern playwrights and poets speak of life as being a fugitive and aimless journey through trackless wastes. C. S. Lewis writes, "...to look out on the night sky with modern eyes in like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist, or looking about one in a trackless forest--trees forever and no horizon...a man today often feels himself confronted with a reality...such that the very question whether it has meaning is itself a meaningless question. It is for him...to discover a meaning, or,to give a meaning or at least a shape to what in itself had neither."

It is so easy for me to understand the despair of men like Camus, Sartre, and Samuel Becket. Their world-view which has predominated since the Enlightenment makes it impossible to know God or experience wonder because it finds at the origin of the journey of life the impersonal universe plus time and chance.

The words of Vergil aptly describe our twentieth century:

"Gone from each fane, each sacred Shrine
Are those who made this realm divine." (Aeneid, ii, 351-2)

But, for the Christian, the journey is not through trackless wastes, although we will certainly lose our way at times, or becomes caught in the slough of despond, way-laid in the town of Vanity-Fair, and we must all pass through the velley of the shadow of death.

But when we know and trust the God of the prophets and apostles and of our Lord Jesus Christ, we discover that the world is a veritable wonderland. When Alice fell down the rabbit-hole she said, "When I used to read fairy-tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one. Even so, when we become a Christian we find ourselves to be a part of a real fairy-tale.

The story of Jacob shows us that our journey can be meaningful and filled with wonder and surprise. When we look up at the towering universe it is like looking at a great building. When our eyes turn to the sky it is like being conducted through an immense cathedral, not like being lost in a shoreless sea. Like Jacob, there are times when we, unlike Cain, can take a rest and experience the awe and wonder of the land of our sojourning. which makes us exclaim, "How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God and this is the gate of heaven."

For that reason, though I leave this church, my friends, and this community, I leave with excitement, looking forward to what the next year will bring. I am excited planning the journey and thinking of the new people, new thoughts, and new experiences that I will encounter.

There is also the excitement of seeing others discover the origin, meaning, and destination of their journey. There are so many who look up at the night sky and see the stars but not the angels; who see the horror of wars, poverty, and ignorance, yet fail to see the demons; who seek power and glory, but not the one to whom it belongs and from whom it comes.

For as Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "...is not God so unnoticeable, so secretly present in His words, that a man might very well live his entire life, be married, become known and respected as a citizen, father, and captain of the hunt, without everhaving discovered God in his works...At the end of his life, one would have to say that one thing had escaped him: his consciousness had taken no note of God."

This is true, not only of non-Christians, but is as often true of Christians who have reduced Christianity to mere beliefs, dogmas, and doctrines, though it contains them all. But the story of Christ demands from us an imaginative as well as an intellectual response. It is directed to the child, the poet, and the savage in us as well as to the conscience and to the intellect.

William Butler Yeats wrote, "In a society that has cast out imaginative tradition, only a few people.. have understanding of imaginative things...(but) when imagination is impoverished, a principal voice--some would say the only voice--for the awakening of wise hope and durable faith, and understanding charity, can speak but inbroken words, if it does not fall silent. And so it has always seemed to me that we, who would reawaken imaginative tradition by making old songs live again, or by gathering old stories into books, take part in the quarrel of Galilee."

I would like to have a part in trying to reawaken people to the fullness of life which is revealed in the Scriptures and seen pre-eminently in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. As I think about returning to school I'm excited about studying those old stories with the intent of making them live again in my life and in the

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lives of those I encounter.

The journey, for the Christian, affords him time to sleep and dream. But if it afforded only that it would be beautiful but thoroughly irrelevant by our standards. We need more than beauty and dreams. We need truth and righteousness, or, if they be unattainable in their purity, we at least need to pursue them. This is what was the motivation of Abraham's journey. "He looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

It is the ruthless pursuit of this city that made Christians in every age and country vulnerable to the accusation leveled against the Apostles, "these that have turned the world upside down are come hither also:....and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, on Jesus." Acts 17:6-7. It is this pursuit for the City of God that has always made Christianity to appear revolutionary and subversive.

The Christian is called to carry always in his heart a non-violent revolution of love and righteousness and to weave it into the fabric of his daily life and of the life of society.

Let us apply the two commandments of Christ absolutely: to love the God he reveals and to love our neighbor. Let us apply these two commandments to the problems of war, poverty, and racism. Let us apply them to every area of our lives to the smallest detail without attempts to weaken their power, without taking account of the established values of our society, or of our status, or our salaries, and we shall soon see that we too will turn the world upside down and make ourselves vulnerable to the accusations of subversion and treason.

Christians have the vision of the Kingdom of God whose king is the Lord Jesus Christ. We have a definite vision and we wish to make the whole world like that vision.

It is this vision which inspired William Wilburforce and Lord Shaftesbury to speak out against the slave trade, factory conditions, and other social evils. It is this vision that motivates many of us to become involved, as Christians, in many local programs such as meals-on-wheels, or any of the many organizations within and without the church whose goal is to in some small way bring us a little closer to that city whose builder and maker is God.

We are trying to reform the world in a particular image; to make it something what we see "afar off...a better country." Reform is a metaphor meaning that we see a certain thing out of shape and we mean to put it into shape. And we know that shape. That is the extreme arrogance of Christianity.

G. K. Chesterton illustrates the necessity of the arrogant narrow-mindedness of Christianity. "Let us suppose a man wanted a particular kind of world: say, a blue world...he might toil for a long time at the transformation;...but...that high-minded reformer would certainly...leave the world...bluer than he found it. If he altered a blade of grass to his favorite colour every day, he would not get on at all...."

But this is exactly the position of the average modern man who is so extremely open-minded that any worthwhile goals go in one ear and out the other. In our extreme broad-mindedness we dabble in Buddhism one day, Theosophy another, and astrology still another, and perhaps we even give some thought to classical Christianity. But as long as the vision of heaven is always changing the earth will remain exactly the same, or else no ideal will remain long enough to be even partly realized.

It does not matter how often we, who are Christians, fail to imitate our ideal, and no Christian really believes that he, or any number of Christians, will ever bring in the kingdom by his efforts. But all of our failures will be fruitful. We will always be dissatisfied with our progress but we cannot become dissatisfied with progressing.

To quote G. K. Chesterton again, "We of Christendom have said that we should hunt God like an eagle upon the mountains; and kill all monsters in the chase."

Well, I'm near the end of this sermon. I didn't know what to say when I began, and now I don't know how to end it. I have tried to show how that all of life is a journey and that, though farewells are occasions of sadness, our Christian faith gives meaning. Like Jacob, we can experience the wonder and adventure of our journey. Our Christian faith also gives us a purpose for the journey. We look for a city whose builder and maker is God.

Finally, the road we travel has been traveled before, and it is He who is the way, without which there is no going, and the truth, without which there is no knowing, and the life, without which there is no growing.

Therefore, "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." Heb. 12:1-2