GOING OUT AND COMING IN

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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the Rev. Gary C. Santmire
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The eighth verse of the 121st Psalm, a Psalm appointed for the installation of a pastors "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore."

This talk about going out and coming in is a characteristic Old Testament figure of speech. What it means is that the Lord will keep your whole life. But I think it's also more than a figure of speech. The image of going and coming came naturally to the Psalmist's mind, for his life was regulated by the experience of coming in to the temple and going out, going out and coming in.

For many pastors, I must say, the experience of going out and coming in is a reality, too. Going out of worship and coming in to worship, yes. But much more the hectic goings and comings of daily parish life. You go to this meeting, you come home. You go calling, you come back to your desk. It can be hectic. Sometimes it can feel as if the film of your life had been speeded up, and you see yourself coming and going so quickly that the whole routine can become laughable, even meaningless.

The same can be true for a congregation. A congregation can get caught up in the routine of coming and going. One thing after another. Hurry to do this. Hurry to do that. So many projects. So much to do. But a pastor and a congregation can take just so much of speeded up film. Sooner or later the pastor of the congregation will weary of the rush. The projector will overheat or the film will snap.

I am saying that busyness for the sake of busyness is going nowhere. I am saying that efficiency for the sake of efficiency is coming nowhere. Yet this is our American propensity, is it not? What question, for example, are most people asked when they come home from a meeting? Of course: "How did it go?" Not first of all, what was said or what was significant, but how did it go. We all tend to be impressed by a smoothly running machine. This is why people tend to like a busy pastor or an active congregation before they fully know what, the pastor or the congregation is really doing.

But a pastor or a congregation is not a machine. Hence sheer busyness or'sheer efficiency is self-defeating. Going and coming sheerly for the sake of going and coming, however smoothe and efficient and well-organized that going and coming may be, is playing fast and loose with the human reality of the pastor and the human reality of the congregation. A pastor's success, for example, ought not to be measured by the number of calls he makes. Nor likewise ought the success of a congregation to be measured by the number of activities it sponsors.

The going and coming to which our text refers is something quite different. It's a going and a coming which is kept by the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore. Or more specifically in the tenth chapter of John, verse nine, which you heard earlier; this is Christ speaking to his Church: "I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." Your going out and your coming in is in the framework established by God in ᵇhrist. Your going out and your coming in is in Christ. Christ is the door.

This means that your going out and your coming in are not for the sake of going out and coming in. They're for the sake of God and his Christ. That, in turn, means that the proper question is not "how are things going?" or "how are things coming?", but "where is the reality of God and his Christ?" Let's ask that question. Where is the reality of God and his Christ?

Answer number one. The reality of God and his Christ are to be found outside of the Church. The Psalmist says, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come?" And then he answers, "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth,"(Ps. 121:1) Our God is Lord of the whole world, not just the Church, He is working his purposes in the whole world, not just in the Church. So we find him outside the Church.

Where? Listen to these words from the Gospel of Matthew: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."(Mt. 25:35f.) The reality of God is right there: wherever the hungry are being fed, the thirsty are being given drink, the sick being visited. So as a pastor and as a congregation that's what you do. You go out and enter into the ministry of God to the outcasts of the world. This clearly means going outside your home base, too, God i, with the whole world, not just with the Church, also not just with the hometown of any particular Church, whether it be Jerusalem or North Quincy. A pastor and a congregation will go out to the hungry, the thirsty, the estranged, the shabbily dressed, the sick, the imprisoned, wherever these people may be.

But that's not all. While there is a time for going out, there is also a time for coming in. There's a time for going to work, and a time for coming home. There's a time for bearing the heat and frustration of the day, and a time for enjoying the family and relaxing. This is true for a pastor and a congregation, no less than it's true for any individual.

Something of this mood is expressed by the Psalmist in the 122nd Psalm at the very beginning, when he says: "I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord."(Ps. 122:1) The people of God, -- you and I and all Christians everywhere, — need to come home every so often, come home and just be ourselves, come home and rest. After all, does not God the maker of heaven and earth do that himself, on the seventh day? God rests from his labors.

When we gather for worship, this is what we do. And more than that, we enter into God's own resting. This is what the author of the letter to the Hebrews is saying in the fourth chapter: "So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his."(Heb. 4:9f.) This is what our worship is, being glad together, being ourselves, standing still in the presence of our Creator, who is with us and around us.

Some people, you know, think that the chief job of a pastor and the chief job of a congregation is ministering to the outcasts of the world. Other people think that the chief job of a pastor and a congregation is sabbath worship, preaching, administering the sacraments, singing hymns. But the Bible, and our text in particular, knows no either/or mentality. It's not either service in the world or worship in the church. It's not either life or liturgy. It's both service and worship. It's both life and liturgy. The very words are interchangeable. That's how close they're bound up with each other. The going out doesn't make sense without the coming in. The coming in doesn't make sense apart from the going out.

Architecturally speaking, this means that the door is the most important part of the Church building. And if you want to speak theological language, you can say that the real presence of God and his Christ is there first of all, at the door. God doesn't bless you and keep you in the world or in the Church first of all, as if either one or the other were the most important. God keeps you in both places at once. Or better, God keeps you in your going and your coming. Very specifically; Christ keeps you in both places at once, that is, Christ keeps you in your coming

and your going. Christ is the door. He is the way to life.

This, finally, is why you don't have to be frantic and hectic about your going and coming, why you can afford to linger in your service in the world and why you can afford to linger in your worship in the Church. God is taking care of both world and Church, And he is caring for you, too, wherever you are. What he has established in Christ will not crumble. The door to true life is always there, however much you and I may stumble and fall in our goings and comings.

Remember, then, that God and his Christ are with you in your work and your worship in your daily service and in your sabbath liturgy. But remember even more that that presence will not fail you, that that presence will not crumble, no matter how difficult the going and the coming may be. Remember that"the Lord will keep you in your going out and your coming in, from this time forth and for evermore."