THE LOVE OF GOD AS THE LEADING OF GOD

--a sermon by the Rev. Paul Santmire
Wellesley College Chapel
Flower Sunday
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Two texts this morning, the one mandated by Henry Fowle Durant over 100 years ago, from I John: "God is love."

The second I have chosen to help us keep the first one down-to-earth, from the Book of Deuteronomy: "It is the Lord who goes before you, he will not fail you or forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed." (Dt. 31:8)

Down-to-earth, I say. I'm sometimes -troubled by our Chapel's lovely decor, with"God is love" inscribed way up there in stone. "God is love" might seem a little ethereal up there, while the text in its biblical setting clearly wants to be understood right down here: not inscribed in stone above us, but inscribed in our hearts within us. "God is love," for the biblical mind, points not to some eternal principle, but to an experienced reality.

This is what the second text, from Deuteronomy, helps us to understand. Moses is speaking to Joshua. It's a poignant moment. The astounding escape of the people Israel from Egypt, the Exodus, is receding into the past by now. The people's long wandering time in the wilderness, some forty years, is a vivid memory, no doubt,- but that time is clearly drawing to a close. The people are now poised to enter the promised land, Canaan.

It's a time of anxiety for them, surely, since an unknown future of uncertain struggles lies before them. It's also a time of personal sadness, since the great leader Moses, who brought them out of Eg^pt and guided them in their wanderings, is now giving them his last testament. He won't go with them into Canaan. The hearts of the people must have been troubled, indeed, and especially the heart of the one who was to become the new leader of the people, Joshua.

Have you ever worked and worked long and hard for something, such as getting into a good College like Wellesley, --and then felt a thud of anxiety in your heart, on the very day you were about to arrive to claim what you had been given? That's the kind of feeling that must have been rampant around the people of Israel as they stood ready to enter the new land of Canaan.

So, at this charged moment, Moses turns to Joshua and speaks his words of assurance. He doesn't say "God is love" in so many words, although he might have. Rather he reaches down deep into the wellsprings of Israel's faith, as it first emerged in the event of the Exodus and the wandering in the wilderness.

Moses' words to Joshua show vividly that the Bible understands the love of God to be, not some eternal principle inscribed above, but as a down-to-earth reality inscribed in human experience. "It is the Lord who goes before you," he tells Joshua, "he will not fail you or forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed."

God will lead the people, Moses is saying. So my theme for this sermon emerges: "the love of God as the leading of God."

I want to sketch some moments in our experience now--moments when the Bible suggests we can experience the love or the leading of God.

One way of doing this, a good way I think, is to reflect about what home means for us, or what it can mean for us. Where is your home? Where do you feel at home? How do you feel when you are at home? How do you feel when you're away from home? These are the kindsof experience I have in mind as places where we can discern the leading of God.

I

The experience of Israel, began with a radical moment of feeling sick of home.

They were sick of their situation. They were sick of being oppressed as slaves in Egypt by Tharoh. And then, according to the ancient story, God raised up a leader, Moses, and delivered them from their bondage. They were feeling sick of home, and in that context they experienced the leading of God.

Most of us, I guess, have felt sick of home, at one time or another. Everyone has to deal with parental figures, and since parents can be and often are Imperfect human beinK, you find yourself, now and then, feeling disenchanted, even alienated.

Many of us have been taught to feel guilty about such sentiments. Many of us have been taught to honor our fathers and mothers, as indeed we should. But the question always has to be asked: what does it mean to honor them? It surely means, above all, to become a full human being yourself, a loving person. But sometimes, the only way to do that, given our parents' imperfections, is to pick up our lives and get out of Egypt, to distance ourselves from them, in love, so we. can enter into our own God-given promise.

I dare say that if no one else is going to push you or me. out of the nest, God is going to do it. God is going to lead us that way, to stir up unrest in our souls, so we can reach out for the promise that God gives all of us for fullness of life as mature human beings.

The same thing holds true for other aspects of our lives, for example, our political perceptions. Last year, students began to discover that they were sick of the assumptions they had been brought up with at home, such as what's good for business is good for American foreign policy. They found themselves so sick of those "down home" views that they stood up and demanded that this college community divest itself of its holdings in firms that do business in South Africa. Too radical? Perhaps. But then again I don't read anything in the Book of Deuteronomy about Moses ho.lding on to his investments in Egypt.

Maybe those students were experiencing the leading of God when they felt so sick of it all, sick of the oppression, sick of the bloodshed, sick of the ineffectiveness of liberal rhetoric in coming to terms with apartheid.

Be that as it may, Biblical faith suggests to us that when we do feel sick of home, c'we should ask ourselves whether this kind of feeling is actually a sign of the leading of God in our lives.

II

So the people of Israel were sick of home, and they experienced the leading of God out of their situation of bondage.

It wasn't too long, however, before a different kind of feeling began to overtake them. Although they were sick of home in Egypt, they did enjoy a certain- kind of security there. It was home, after all, even though it was a wretched experience. In contrast, wandering in the wilderness was just that, wandering. So very soon after the Exodus, it seems, they started grumbling in their tents. They started murmuring against Moses. They started whispering and then shouting that they were getting nowhere.

From the feeling of being sick of home, they found themselves feeling homeless■

I guess most of us can relate to this in one way or another.

A Junior-was just telling a group of us the other day about her feelings of loneliness and uprootedness as she walked down her hallway to claim her new single this week, by a line of faces she had scarcely seen before. She shut the door, she said, and cried.

Some have suggested, indeed, that the central experience of this decade in American history is the experience of homelessness. The sixties are surely over, if they ever really were. People can debate that. But they're over. You and I face a world today which more and more seems out of control and going nowhere, except perhaps toward oblivion.

You pick up the daily newspaper and you read that 5.00 million people are malnourished, 100 million lack clean water, .800 million are illiterate, 350 million are unemployed or earn less than $50 a year. 250 million li’e in slums. 1.6 million people lack basic health care. You read the papers and you're stunned, numbed and maybe you don't want to pick them up for awhile. The vast majority of the human family is homeless today, and that means that you and I, who are fortunate, cannot help but feel homeless ourselves because we are human beings.

I scarcely need to mention, in addition, the personal tragedies that many of us experience from time to time, sickness, death, separation, and so on. As a matter of fact, homes, some of them our own homes, are breaking up with increasing frequency in our day.

So in a whole variety of ways you and I, like the people of ancient Israel, know what homelessness is. Yet this was not a permanent predicament for them. In that time of wandering, that time of emptiness and uncertainty,--when they tried all manner of solutions of their own making, including the golden calf — they experienced the leading of God in their lives.

This happened above all in the events of Sinai, where they heard the Word of God, the self-disclosure of God. The ten commandments, as you may know, are actually called in Hebrew the Ten Words. In the time of their homelessness the people experienced the revelation of their God, giving them guidance.

So I commend the Word of God to you this day. I suggest to you that you might want to consider anew the discipline of attending to God's self-disclosure in the Word.

In the Jewish tradition you do this through the study of The Torah, which is celebrated as a sweet, enlivening discipline, above all on the festival of Simhath Torah, in October.

In the Christian tradition the discipline of attending to God's self-disclosure, takes the form of focusing on the biblical witness to Jesus, whose life, those of us who are Christians believe, is the incarnation of God's Word, which we celebrate at Christmas.

But this morning I will leave the elaboration of this theme for our various traditions, for Friday night and Sunday morning, and for other sacred days and hours of our communal and individual reflection.

Here I want to underline only the biblical confession that God leads those who feel homeless, through revelation, through self-disclosure, through the Divine Word of guidance.

Ill

Now there was yet another side to Israel's experience of wandering in the wilderness which I think we will note for the sake of our own edification. If the people of Israel were first of all sick of heme and then found themselves feeling homeless, They also readily felt homesick.

I am aware that this is a tender word around here, at this time of year, especially for some of you who are away from home for the first time of your life. So allow me an aside before I proceed to my next point.

Our Editor-in-Chief has helped everyone in this respect, I think, by speaking the unspeakable truth, that she was homesick when she came to Wellesley. "It's almost amazing that.I lived through first semester freshman year," she tells us. "From my first feeling of abandonment as my parents drove away and let me standing on Route 135 ..., things were miserable."

I will quote her at length in case you haven't read her News story. "The night of the first Quad mixer, I had two hours of screaming hysterics. My first classes destroyed the remnants of my confidence. The teachers were brilliant and everyone else in the class was at least a genius ...I paid great attention to detail and missed the overall points completely."

"I felt intensely lonely," she tells us, "and spent much of my time crying. The first week was the longest of my life, and I talked to my mother everyday at least once."

I guess you'd say she was homesick.

The truth of the matter is that everyone feels that way from time to time, that it's natural, and that you can live through it, if you own up to it and lean on a friend or' two.

Homesickness only becomes a problem, as far as the biblical faith is concerned, when it leads to idolatry and unrighteousness. Homesickness becomes a . problem when it leads you to create some surrogate god of your own, some crutch to get you through, some pain-killer of your own making that takes you away from reality and responsibility.

Israel did that with the golden calf. 'I guess you and I are prompted to do it in a whole host of ways. Popular culture, for example, creates paper deities to plaster over the boil of its homesickness, i.ts nostalgia for a simple sane world, which is no longer. Witness the immense attention so many have given to the likes of Luke Skywalker and Obi Wan Kenobee.

Now I don't want to take away any innocent gusto you may have found in Star Wars or Close Encounters or Ofi God, but I hope you will allow me to observe that the god those films portray -- "May the Force be with you and all the rest"— may not be worth the $2.50 it cost you each of the five times you saw the film. I mean, if you think the Force is what God is like, then you may want to think also that Princess Lea is what women are like. I find both ideas intolerable.

Homesickness, I'm saying, is okay and natural as long as you don't create a surrogate puppet deity for yourself as a result. The God whom biblical faith confesses, clearly is no vague faceless force, but a powerful, purposeful, person who sets the oppressed free, who forgives sins, who creates life out of death, who leads all those who trust through the valley of the shadows, toward still waters.

You may or may not chose to believe in the God whom the Bible discloses, but at least, if you do, this is a God worth believing in.

IV

We arrive, then, at the point where Moses and Joshua are standing. The days of feeling sick of home, homeless, or homesick are behind them. That's what Moses is trying to tell Joshua. Now is the time, Moses is saying, when the people can feel homeward bound.

Now is the time when the people can leave the parent figure of Moses behind. Now is the time when they can forget their uncertainty about going into the new land. Now is the time when they can rid themselves of their sense of homelessness and any feelings of being homesick. Now is the time when they can venture forward into the future, in faith, and claim the inheritance that God has promised them. Now is the time when they can feel homeward bound.

Moses says to Joshua, reassuring him, drawing on the people's experience of God's leading them, from the Exodus through the wilderness to this place: "It is the Lord who goes before you, he will not fail you or forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed. "

God will lead you into your future, in other words. You don't have to return to Egypt. You don't have to remain forever in a predicament of homelessness or homesickness. God will lead you toward your inheritance toward the fulfilment of your promise. You can be homeward bound.

This is not to say that your future and mine, and our collective future as members of the human family, will be without stress or strain, without disappointments or suffering. It is rather to suggest that you and I can venture forth with the confidence that we will continually be given new possibilities by God; to lay claim to the world of peace and justice and contentment, that God promises us all.

Only a few weeks ago, a group of women joined together in Boston for a very special, evocative march. Under the leadership of WAVAW, Women Against Violence Against Women, more than five hundred women marched through the streets of Boston at night, as they said: "to take back the night for women."

"Our initial and major concern," one of their leaders explained, "is reclaiming the night. Every woman knows the fea*-1 of walking down the street alone at night. This fear keeps us virtual prisoners in our homes and dependent on males for protection. The stark realization that many women are not safe in their own homes led us to a more inclusive analysis of violence against women. The threat of violence in the street (day or night) is only a small part. We want to call attention to, and work with others toward ending violence in the streets; in the home, in the workplace, in institutions, in the media, and in the health care system."

To take back the night — that whole march was precisely the kind of demonstration of faith commended to us by our text. To claim the world of peace and justice and contentment that God has promised you, to venture forth into that promised land, that - preeminently perhaps - is the place where you can experience the leading of God, according to the Bible.

V

Here are some down-to-earth moments of our experience, then: times when we feel sick of home, times when we feel homeless or home sick, times when we feel homeward bound. These are some times, according to biblical testimony, when you and I can experience tfe leading of God, should we wish to attend to that dimension of our experience..

I recommend these times to you this day, as we stand here poised to enter a new academic year. In such times, I believe, when you look for the leading of God you will find it. In such times, I believe, when you trust in the love of God, you will experience it.

Then the love of God will indeed be a down-to-earth reality for you and for me, no ethereal, eternal principle inscribed above, but an accessible experience inscribed in our hearts.

"It is the Lord who goes before you," says Moses, "he will not fail you or forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed." Amen.