GOING SOMEWHERE OR NOWHERE?

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
Wellesley College Chapel
Flower Sunday
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Texts: "God is love." (I John 4:16)
"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."(Ex. 3:14)

Everyone has their summer story. That's what most of us have been talking about for the last several days.

The ones I have heard thus far, have all seemed to have a common thread: the theme of being on a journey. One student tells about her trip to Kenya, where, among other things, she interviewed families with a tape recorder for a research project back here. An administrator tells us all about a voyage she and her family undertook, sailing to Bermuda. Yet another student narrates how she worked the first part of the summer for a banking institution, which, she says, drove her up the wall; so she decided to move over to another job with the Salvation Army, working with some dispossessed people in New York City, with a sense of deep satisfaction.

Maybe we're all trying to tell ourselves something, as we face the new academic year. Maybe we're all reminding ourselves, in one way or another, that we're underway, that we're launched, that we're all on some kind of journey together.

If this is the case, and I suspect it is, the question of the day should surely be this: are we going somewhere, or are we going nowhere? I take this, then, as the theme of this sermon, which more accurately reflects what I want to say this morning, than the one which I announced earlier. Going somewhere or nowhere?

My text of course is the one that Mr. Durant mandated a century ago: "God is love." But lest that text be lost in mundane sentimentality down here or alien ethereality up there, inscribed in stone, I want to focus this morning on what I take to be a good Hebraic rendering of that idea, in the Book of Exodus.

The setting is a journey. The people of Israel are on their way from Egypt and slavery toward the Promised Land and freedom. At one point along the way, the great prophetic lesder Moses enters into a dialog with God, concerning the prospects of the people as they wander through the wilderness. He asks for guidance. In response, he hears these words from God: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

I.

The first thing I want to point you to this morning, both with a view to out own experience and the context of the Exodus text, is the Ines capability of motion.

According to an oft-told story, which you probably know, a little boy came home from Sunday School one day, no doubt having just been instructed in the Genesis story, where Adam is taken from the earth, and probably having heard some serious-minded teacher repeat the traditional burial words, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"--the story says that he happened to be looking under his bed at the accumulation of dirt there: and he called out, "Mom, come here and look. Someone's either coming or going."

Whatever you may think of the profundity of the story, he was phenomenologically correct in his observation. In human history, much more so even than in the world of nature generally, things are constantly in flux. Motion is inescapable. Change is inevitable.

You leave home, perhaps for the first time, and find yourself at a place called Wellesley. You return from a happy summer, only to find--as I overheard one student saying this week, "My God, I'm a senior!" Perhaps you face the prospect of MCATs of LSATs, with a huge dose of uncertainty. Or, as a faculty member, you begin your first class, with the vivid awareness that this is the last year of your teaching contract or that your time for retirement is just around the corner.

Robert Pinksy, of our English Department, has just published a book-length poem, which I recommend to you for its lucidity and its transparence to deeper things. It has the title An Explanation of America: A Poem for My Daughter. At one point, he says to his daughter, and to us:

> For place, itself, is always a kind of motion,
> A part of it artificial and preserved,
> And a. part born in a blur of loss and change--
> All places in motion from where we thought they were....

Such is the inescapability of motion in our lives.

II.

How do we respond to this situation? So you've just arrived at Wellesley or you've just discovered that you're a senior or you've just realized afresh that this is your last year of teaching here. Or you're pondering marriage. Or you're facing the end of a personal relationship. Or you're facing a career choice. Or whatever. How do we respond to this inescapable fact of motion?

To answer this question, I want to highlight some strategies that are available to us all, as we find ourselves suspended here this morning, in the midst of motion.

I begin with a brief examination of Ordinary Strategy A. The essence of Ordinary Strategy A is getting fixated.

The people of Israel, you will remember, did not show total enthusiam with the life of wandering in the wilderness, once they had left Egypt. As a matter of fact, we're told that they mumbled and grumbled in their tents, and began to hanker for the good old days, so called, in the land of Egypt. Rather than choosing to go forward, they got themselves fixated on the oppressive ways of Egypt.

Here I do not want to issue a blanket condemnation of the military-industrial-academic complex, the kind we used to hear in the nineteen sixties. I do not want to make any unqualified observations about the injustices of our society, its racism, its sexism, its classism. I do not want to suggest, in so many words, that America is Egypt, and that insofar as you and I have opted to be Americans we have got ourselves fixated on Egypt, although, I must confess, some of these thoughts have crossed my mind.

Rather, let me simply report a comment I heard one upperclass student make this week (and I use the upperclass now in the sense of junior, senior, etc.). She was asked by a new student why she had chosen to come to Wellesley. She replied, without a moment's hesitation, "so I can make money."

To this hour, I do not believe that she meant what she said in just the way she said it. But let's consider for a moment what that might mean, if she did. In all likelihood it will mean that she will enter the famous dog-eat-dog world of success at any price, where she will try to win friends and influence people, in order to get ahead of them, to beat them out, to be number one, like the Dallas Cowboys (forget for the moment, if you will, the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders). She may well end up getting herself fixated on the ways of a destructive society, buying into the mores of a world that is undoubtedly very much opposed to the deeper potential of herself as a human being.

So much for Ordinary Strategy A, getting fixated.

III.

Another option for dealing with our lives, as we find them in motion, and as we feel all the uncertainty and anxiety that life underway can bring with it, is what I shall call Ordinary Strategy B.

I should perhaps assure you at this point that although there are many options for dealing with change, perhaps more than there are letters in the alphabet» I am not going to go through the whole alphabet this morning: only this one, B, and one final one, to which I will turn presently.

What is Ordinary Strategy B?

Ponder for a moment what it must be like to live completely fixated on the oppressive ways of a destructive world. Something inside of you, some deeper voice, perhaps your conscience, perhaps the prompting of some higher power--something tells you that this is a wretched way to live, not only destructive of others, as for example, when infant products are marketed for profit and thousands of babies die in the third world: not only destructive to others, but destructive of yourself, too, your own integrity as a human being. Ordinary Strategy A, getting fixated on the ways of a destructive society, becomes intolerable.

So you cast around for some way to escape from it all, some way to dull your senses, some way to turn off the newscasts about human suffering, some way to avoid the pictures of children with malnutrition, some way to assuage the anguish you feel inside as you realize that your life maybe going nowhere, fixated as it is on a pattern that is alien to your deeper self.

The people of Israel, accordingly, found themselves carried away with some ecstatic cult of their own devising, focusing on the golden calf. They sought a kind of narcotic escape: a fix, if you will, in religious ecstacy.

We live in a secular age, of course. So that kind of religious option is not nearly so popular for many people, although, as you know, we have been experiencing the birth of a variety of new religious phenomena, widely called "cults".

But I take it that the most typical form of narcotic escape in our day is not religious. It may be drugs or alcohol, although I have a hunch that those options—severe as they are for millions in this country--are played up by the media more as a diversion than anything else.

The other day the education section of the Boston Globe carried an ad for a local college, thankfully not this one, which read: "Liberal Arts...An Investment in Yourself." Investing in yourself, the cult of self, the culture of narcissism—this seems to be one of the more popular strategies of our day.

Finding yourself in motion, underway in life, unavoidably on a journey, and yet disillusioned by an oppressive world, you turn to yourself: your future, your lifestyle, your career, your grades, your relationships, your everything, you and your pleasure as the narcotic experience that will help you cope. Instead of getting fixated, you look for a fix.

We do not need to ponder this phenomenon too much, I think, to realize that the cult of self-worship takes us nowhere. All it does is leave us totally isolated from any significant relationships: all alone, in a twilight world that's scarcely distinguishable from life in the womb, which is fine for the fetus;, but scarcely suitable for people who want to be mature human beings.