

Road Tripping – Trinity C

Proverbs 8, Romans 5, John 16, Psalm 42

One can't help noticing as we read these lessons, how the Wisdom Literature, like the part of Proverbs we just heard, understood Wisdom to be a 'She,' but somehow, by the time John's Gospel was translated into this book She has become a "He." Quite possibly the biggest mistake we've ever made.

In the King James version, Psalm 42 begins: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so longeth my soul for Thee...my soul is thirsting for God, the God of my life." We are gathered here this morning because we long for God.

When the psalmist tells us to respond to the wondrous inexplicability of nature and the universe by placing hope in the power God and praising God's holy name, we thrill at the clearness of our mission. We can do that! This is worship. God is telling us: 'Yes, do do that voodoo that you do so well.' And we cooperate.

But because God's nature is one of creative action, and because we are created in the spiritual image and likeness of God, life offers us more. The plan requires more of us. God's peace comes at a greater price. That price is suffering. Keep in mind that the word suffering varies in meaning from agony all the way back to cooperation. The point is: our souls must fully experience the spectrum of life if we are fully to be God's people. Hope, yes, but also hardship; triumph, yes, but also terror; love, yes, but also death.

I am reminded of an experience I had back in New York, where my daughter Eve went to college. She did very well, I don't mind telling you; her graduation was, as Groucho Marx used to say, a gala day. At one point the choir sang a lovely setting of the old Celtic blessing: "May the road rise up to meet you..." At that point Eve leaned over to me and whispered, "Be careful what you pray for; remember Merrowvista?"

'May the road rise up to meet you' sounds sweet, but she was reminding me of what happened at summer camp when she was 14. It was a favorite place of all three children, their aunt and grandmother too, going back to the twenties. They take long bike trips through the rolling hills of New Hampshire and Vermont, learning confidence, self-reliance and persistence. On her bike trip that summer, she was speeding down a steep hill when she lost control of her bike and crashed.

This led to the phone call you never want to get. Her Mom went and bravely fetched Eve home. She looked bad, with bruises, broken teeth, lots of what they cutely call road rash. She was suffering, in the sense of great pain, not cooperation. But an amazing thing happened to her over the following week, as we coddled her, prayed for her, and changed her dressings, God spoke to her privately, in a way she could not possibly have understood before the crash and filled her with the kind of character that Paul is talking about in the letter to the Romans.

Within a week, she said she wanted to go back for the final days of camp. Well, you can imagine the awe and wonder on the faces of her campmates when I dropped her off – looking like a mummy – it was positively heroic! And you can imagine the relief and gratitude on the part of the camp staff too. Nothing is worse for morale than having a camper leave in an ambulance. Nowadays, only if you're looking for it can you see a tiny blue line on her lip where the road rose up to meet her. Scant physical evidence, but the character inside has only continued to grow.

When Jesus tells us that more will be revealed, that we don't need and can't take all the information and knowledge that the future will hold for us, make no mistake: this is the nature and the measure of God's purpose and the absolute foundation of our hope. God will provide the wisdom as we need her, no sooner, no later; we can count on it. And we really don't want to know everything all at once right now, thank you.

In this outpost of God's holy church, St. Peter's by the Sea, we thirst for God; we are seekers. We help each other accept the suffering, in every sense of the word, that awaits us, because we feel the grace that enables us to see past the suffering – the disappointment, loss, injury, even death – to the hope that is ours for the enjoying together and the character that is ours for the growing together.

The key ingredient of both joy and character is love; and it is the foundation of all right action. In truth, we understand the only thing God wants more from us than worship, is loving action. But we must each experience life

for ourselves, in order for the character to grow. That is the function of God's nurture, and our great comfort and certain faith is that God will support us in our seeking, our accepting and our helping of each other.

Thomas Paine once observed that societies exist in what he called 'an eternal now,' It was his opinion that just because something has existed for ages tells us nothing about its value. The past is dead and the living should use their powers of analysis to sweep away existing arrangements when necessary, and begin the world anew. Like the Electoral College. Paine even suggested that laws should expire after 30 years so each new generation could begin again. Food for thought! Perhaps it's safe to say that today (as another T. Paine declared) just about all of us are "ready for a brand new jive."

After New York, I was in Cincinnati for my other daughter's graduation – also a gala day. There, as so often happens, I learned a lesson from my son Jim, that I hope I never forget. He and I stopped at a mall to buy a hatchet for me to use camping while he visited his mom and sisters and cousins before the graduation. We got off the highway easily and into the mall and the store. But when I tried to find the on-ramp again, I got – what's the word? ...sidetracked? I got... Oh yes, that's it: I got lost. I figured, 'Go under the highway, take a few right turns, and sooner or later you'll find the next on-ramp.' The operative word proved to be 'later.'

For the better part of twenty minutes I drove and searched and apologized and rationalized and explained

how logically I had missed my way. All the while Jim sat in the back, realizing that he was increasingly late for the dinner party. Finally, I found a road I knew would get us back on track and I made another pained remark like, “What a hassle it is to get on this highway – the signage, the signage...!” To which Jim quietly replied, “Yes, Dad, and your narrative is really helping us get through it, too.”

Now ordinarily, I don’t endorse sarcasm in my near and dear. But he had me dead to rights. I laughed for a couple of days in the woods thanks to that one. Because I was not only getting him lost, I was forcing him to have my experience of it instead of his own. In a real sense, he was a hostage to my emotional program, my version of his story. He was the one who was missing dinner; I had nowhere special to be.

Jesus is telling us to live our own lives, to feed his sheep, to take loving actions and form our own interpretations, to have our own emotional experiences and acknowledge that occasionally we must suffer. Because our ducks will never all be in a row; we will never have all the information we will ever need to be perfect. But what we will always have is the blessed assurance of God’s loving companionship and wisdom when the road rises up to meet us. Each of our lives is a new age with new challenges. We overlap, develop, accompany one another and die away, but the running stream, the water brook of God’s power for which we thirst is constantly underneath all we call life.