

## May 16, 2010: COME HOME AND STAY

Revelation 22:12[-14, 16-17. 20]-21; John 17:20-26; Psalm 97

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Back in my construction days, I sometimes had to travel. It was rare enough that an overnight trip was fun, but once when my kids were still in grade school, I had to be in New York Sunday through Thursday, followed by a Friday-Saturday professional society meeting in Omaha, Nebraska. By the time the week was over, I was lonely for my kids, exhausted from the stress of travel and strangers, and couldn't remember what time zone I was in. The final straw was arriving at the airport to learn that bad weather had delayed my flight home. I let my family know and looked for a place to sit. All the waiting areas had people stacked in like cord wood, so it was no easy task. I was weepy, frustrated, homesick, disoriented, afraid I would have to sleep on an airport floor.

As my self-pity wrapped me like a soggy WW II army surplus sleeping bag, I noticed a young priest sitting across from me. I knew he was a priest because he was wearing a floor-length cassock, so I felt entitled to assume that the book he was reading—the one with all the ribbon markers—was a Bible. I had just begun the ancient Church practice of systematic scripture study, the daily reading that coincided with what the rest of the faith community was reading, something called the common lectionary. Additionally, I had also just learned that there were Bibles available other than King James (the Authorized Version). For the first time, my personal faith journey was within a community of faith, and I brightened at the thought of a common spirit in the airport with whom to pass the time.

Thinking to establish common ground, I pulled my sagging facial muscles into a friendly expression and asked the priest, "What translation are you reading?" He eyed me coldly and replied, "This is not a translation. This is the Latin." There followed an earful about the travesty of the Roman Church abandoning "God's language" (Latin) in the mass. Feeling patently outside The One True Faith, I figured I had blown all my conversational gambits. I spent the next two hours listening to a parade of the devout decrying the devastation wrought by Vatican II and the Protestant Reformation. I lost a conversational opportunity, but I came to a deeper ownership of my own faith, more determined to be embedded in my faith community. Perhaps because I was so naïve, I could see similarities as well as differences with the priest's faith. In respecting his opinion, I could also see how my newly re-established faith held the same threads as his—that of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church (Nicene Creed). I discovered that especially on a journey, conversation connects us to each other, whether it is in agreement or disagreement.

And we *are* on a journey. It seems like people of faith have always thought in terms of journey or pilgrimage. It didn't start with the Muslim notion of the *haj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Our deepest memories of journey return to Abraham and Sarah. Europe's medieval Christians refined that journey tradition with pilgrimage churches, to substitute for travel to the Holy Land for the faithful, but pilgrimage is not a dead faith practice. The most recent *Christian Century* cites the 10 million pilgrims who annually visit the shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the half million who walk Spain's Santiago de Compostela every year, the 100,000 teens who visit the Taize monastery in France each summer. Churches in Europe and North America are in decline, but numbers of pilgrims are on the rise. The author concludes that this trend reflects a deep spiritual hunger.

Pilgrimage is intended to be transformative, not journey for the sake of travel, seeing the sights. Pilgrims without a destination may as well be tourists. Even if we do not literally travel, we can activate spiritual discipline to be present to our faith journey at home. Purposeful destination is the point. As pilgrims, we already know our destination, and I don't mean "heaven." Our destination is the subject of both Jesus' prayer for his disciples *and* the last words in the Christian Bible, today's passage from Revelation. God has known our destination since before the beginning of time (this is not the old joke about Presbyterians and predestination). Both passages use a powerful, ancient Greek word—*telos*—which means consummation, end, or goal. John couches *telos* (our destination) in terms of knowing, unity, glory, and God's love. For us, that means home—ours! Jesus' prayer reveals that the whole *telos* of his life has been for us to *perceive* God's love. When Rick and I

moved here, we heard many stories about the Oregon Trail. We were awed by the courage—physical, emotional, spiritual—it took to undertake and accomplish such a journey. It was ironic, because my generation had come of age on Jack Kerouac's travel book, *On the Road*. For Kerouac, the point is not the destination, it's the journey. For people on the Oregon Trail, the point was not the journey, it was the destination. For them, to give up the destination meant to give up hope. I wonder if our destination gives us hope for the journey.

Revelation ends with a three-fold invitation, "Come!" John's vision isn't a mystic jumble of end-time events. John's story is not a timetable; it's a Person, the Ruler of church and cosmos, beginning and end, alpha and omega.<sup>1</sup> For the last 2,000 years we've misread the Revelator's sense of urgency. Most of the time we think it has developed into a technical problem of timing and solve it theologically. But this isn't a story about a private, spiritual event. This is about "a coming to the world, to redeem the world" (Peterson), to be unified in love with the world.

That's what we say every time we sit down to the Lord's Supper. I hold up the bread and wine and say that by sharing this meal, we declare Christ's saving life, death, and resurrection until he comes again. I remind us that we'll all sit with him at that Table. This is the eventuality for which Jesus prays during the last supper. We and the disciples are the subject of a conversation within the Trinity. The conversation is about unity, but Jesus doesn't mean ecumenism, he means union with God and each other expressed as love. In other words, he means what the Revelator means—that this unity of love has been the goal of creation all along. It is the home to which we are headed. It is our destination.

Saudi astronaut Sultan Bin Salman al-Saud describes his journey into space. "The first day," he says, "we all pointed to our countries. The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day we were aware of only one Earth."<sup>2</sup> That's our destination, friends—that state of being *one* in the mystery of God's creative love. We already know where we're headed, and it hasn't changed one iota since before the beginning of time. We are headed to God, who even now calls *all of creation*, "Come!"

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Peterson, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *The Home Planet*, ed. Kevin W. Kelley (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1988), 82.