

May 9, 2010: GLORY AT HOME

Revelation 21:10, 21:22-22:5; John 14:23-29; Psalm 19

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My mother, having been dead 22 years, does not have the luxury of contradicting me when I impute some pithy piece of wisdom to her, as I did last week. I mention this, not only because it's Mother's Day, but because "home" is in today's sermon title—"Glory at Home." I wanted to reassure you that, two months ago when I chose that title, I wasn't thinking of my mother's 1950s version of the glories of homemaking. I was thinking about an Eastertide preaching series on "glory" taken from the book of Revelation, and I thought it might help us understand the theological convolution Jesus makes at the Last Supper. He is responding to a question about how he is going to reveal to *them* (but not to the rest of the world) where he's going. The answer is a riddle about hearing and doing and abiding, which makes me feel like I've got Jello for brains.

"Glory at Home," is my Reader's Digest Condensed version of the combination of the John and Revelation texts, but that still doesn't say much until you know that what I mean is shorthand for a promise God has been making all along: I will be *with* you. God has always comforted the people of God—whether they're setting off on pilgrimage or undertaking a near-impossible task—God's reassurance is always, "I will be with you." This promise of "with" is supposed to be understood as meaning wholeness, peace, unity. Today, Jesus makes a down payment on that promise in the present tense: he promises an Advocate after he leaves. That Advocate means, "Don't worry that Jesus is absent; you haven't been abandoned." We call that Advocate Holy Spirit.

Glory can be a little abstract. Frederick Buechner says glory is God's *style*, in the same sense as an artist or poet or musical composer has a style.¹ I've always admired people who know an art form so well they can look and say, "That's a Picasso" or listen to a few bars and say, "That's Lady Gaga." Not because they know the particular work, but because they recognize the characteristics of that artist's style. According to Psalm 19, God's style is as recognizable as "The heavens are telling the glory of God." "To the connoisseur," Buechner says, "not just sunsets and starry nights but dust storms, rain forests, garter snakes, the human face, are all unmistakably the work of a single hand. Glory is the outward manifestation of that hand in its handiwork just as holiness is the inward. To behold God's glory, to sense his style, is the closest you can get to him this side of Paradise, just as to read *King Lear* is the closest you can get to Shakespeare. Glory is what God looks like when for the time being all you have to look at him with is a pair of eyes." Glory is God's fingerprint in creation.

John the Revelator describes a glorious city that needs no temple because God is *right there*. There's no need for sun or moon because humans live so intimately with God that they use divine light. The city gates never close because there is no need for a boundary between the sacred and profane. In the middle of this city, there is finally a tree for healing and uniting, not one like the trees in the Garden Eden that judged the knowledge of good and evil, that differentiated for life or death. Now that's a city to come home to! It's the all-glory, all the time channel.

The Revelator's picture of home is theological, but Buechner says home is where we go "When the weather is bad. . . a place where we can retreat to lick our wounds." Buechner defines home by talking about homelessness, putting an ethical spin on Jesus' statement, "if you love me you will keep my word." "To be really at home," Buechner says, "is to be really at peace, and there can be no real peace for any of us until there is some measure of real peace for all of us. When we close our eyes to the deep needs of other people, whether they live on the streets or under our own roof—when we close our eyes to our own deep need to reach out to them—we can never be fully at home anywhere." In other words, the kind of love Jesus wants and the sense of home he means is one that needs others to experience the peace and love you experience. "Whoever does not love me does not keep my words."

¹ *Wishful Thinking* (p. 35). "Homelessness" is on p. 46.

Quaker Parker Palmer recognizes home after years of struggle with depression. He writes,² “I had read somewhere that humility is central to the spiritual life . . . I was proud to think of myself as humble! What I did not know is that for some of us the path to humility goes through humiliation—being brought low, unable to function, stripped of pretenses and defenses, feeling fraudulent, empty, useless.” Depression. It is from the humus of this common ground, Palmer says, that one regrows one’s life. “The spiritual journey is full of paradoxes,” he says, “and one of them is that the humiliation that brings us down—down to ground on which it is safe to stand and to fall—eventually takes us to a firmer and fuller sense of self. When people ask me how it felt to emerge from depression, I can give only one answer: I felt at home in my own skin and at home on the face of the earth, for the first time.”

When my depression was the worst, one rock and roll in particular resonated with me, Bruce Springsteen’s song, “Glory Days,” about the old acquaintances the singer runs across, people living in the past, because that’s the only place where they experienced meaning and purpose—their glory days. Their present lives are so small, their purposes so—well—meager that high school triumphs are the only things they can live on, and even those were small. As the rest of their lives are spent in unraveling, they are consoled by memories of their glory days.

John’s Revelation is a different kind of glory days, a different home toward which we head. I’m told that there is a church in Cairo you reach by driving through an endless landscape of refuse and the stench of a city landfill. It is a place populated by people who eek out a living by sorting through garbage to find what is useful or recyclable. In the midst of all that is thrown away, perched atop an imposing hill of trash, sits a church built with no walls. Here is a place where people worship the God who says, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

Friends, this has been the promise all along. The deepest, best, most rewarding thing God ever says to the people of God is, “I will be with you.” This is the glory—whether home is a place without walls on top of a landfill or a lovingly cozy nest, God’s promise holds: “I will be with you.”

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² “All the Way Down,” *Weavings*, September-October 1998, 40.