

The Passion of the Psalms: The Destination

August 3, 2008

Year A: Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Camp Norwesca; near Chadron, Nebraska
Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

Maybe I've been to camp a little too long and helped out a bit too much with Bible School but one thing I've learned over these past couple of weeks is that we learn better when everyone participates. So today's sermon is an audience participation message.

It is summer and we are in the season of vacations and traveling. Even with our high prices people are still traveling some where in the car and with Sturgis coming up on their bikes. In light of the vacation and travel season I would like all of us to say "Are We There, Yet?" when prompted.

Let's try it: <ARE WE THERE, YET?>

Read Psalm 17 (Norwesca) / Hymn #749 (sanctuary)

[Psalm 17:1-15 \(NRSV\)](#)

Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. ²From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right.

³If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. ⁴As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. ⁵My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.

⁶I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. ⁷Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.

⁸Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, ⁹from the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me.

¹⁰They close their hearts to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly.

¹¹They track me down; now they surround me; they set their eyes to cast me to the ground. ¹²They are like a lion eager to tear, like a young lion lurking in ambush.

¹³Rise up, O LORD, confront them, overthrow them! By your sword deliver my life from the wicked, ¹⁴from mortals -- by your hand, O LORD -- from mortals whose portion in life is in this world. May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them; may their children have more than enough; may they leave something over to their little ones.

¹⁵As for me I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

You know what I love about a destination, especially when you've got a car full of luggage, 3 kids, and a new puppy, is just the thought of getting there. For those of you with children I believe the only thing that keeps you going, the only thing that helps you from losing your mind, the only thing that stops you from turning around and saying threats that you know you can't keep, is knowing that you are almost there. It is the thought of reaching your destination that keeps you from doing any harm to your children. It is the thought of the destination that literally keeps hope alive.

And to be fair it is not just parents that live with this mentality. I came across this cute little story the other day - A little girl became restless as the preacher's sermon dragged on and on. Finally, she leaned over to her mother and whispered, "Mommy, if we give him the money right now, will he let us go?"¹

<ARE WE THERE, YET?>

Folks, you know we need hope – NOW – more than ever. We see it in our vacation funds. More of it is going to gasoline. We see it in our housing market. The only thing going for us in that department is simply the hope that someday it will turn around. We see it in our economy. Few of us here have memories of that dark time in America called the Great Depression. Many of us may not remember but we have stories of parents, grandparents, neighbors that have told us how bleak it was. We may not have lived through the Depression but many of us remember the dark economic times of the 70s and I sure remember the farm crisis of the 80s as I saw my aunt and uncle – family farmers – declare bankruptcy not once but twice, my father – who ran a farming bank – coming home depressed. But what I remember most of that bleak time was what happened at Christmas. Everyone in the family was engaged in farming. Every one was hurting, but when I didn't know that. I just knew that at Christmas time something new was going to happen. We were simply told, "we won't be exchanging presents this year." As a little kid, you know things are tough when you hear that. And today, we are in a dark economic time and the only thing keeping us going is believing in the destination – knowing that it will end. Folks, recessions have ended before and today, our recession will come to an end again.

<ARE WE THERE, YET?>

Now I know that the economy is foremost on our mind. We hear it in the news every day. Just about everyone has something to say about what is going on in our nation and we forget that there is a war on. At least, until they report another bombing or we hear about another casualty and we wonder will this war ever end.

<ARE WE THERE, YET?>

These issues of national importance take up a lot of thought and energy but what about issues here at home. I know many of you are taking classes – we live in a college town – it's what we do. I not only hear this from my wife but many of you that are working on your degree, you wonder some times, often times, will I ever graduate.

<ARE WE THERE, YET?>

¹ "Will he let us go?" *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part II.* 31.

Or maybe you are having some issues with your marriage, or maybe it's some trouble in your family – you can't reach your kids – communication has broken down. Or maybe it's your job, or your career, or maybe things are not going well with your business and you feel you simply can not get ahead. You long for some type of end to bring any kind of hope.

<ARE WE THERE, YET?>

There is so much we need hope for. We long for the destination when things will be better. We long to just finally get there.

For a long time, Carl Erskine, a big-league baseball pitcher, came to Marble Collegiate Church. He pitched for the Brooklyn Dodgers. He was one of the best in his time. He once held the record for the most strikeouts in a World Series game. He pitched a no-hitter in a World Series game against the formidable lineup of the New York Yankees. As he pitched against them during this game, he wondered, "Am I going to have a no-hitter?"

That kind of thinking was devastating to him because, in that every minute, stress took hold of him. He had been playing a loose and easy flow. But now, he got himself all tightened up. He had worked up to a count of 3 and 2 against one of the greatest batters in baseball. But Erskine was afraid of throwing the next ball, because if the batter connected with it, that would be the end of his no-hitter. He had to pitch the ball past him, but he didn't feel equal to the challenge. He was too tense. So he walked around the box. He picked up the resin. He wiped his hand on his trouser leg. He picked up some dust and threw it around. All the time he was doing these things, his mind traveled back to Indiana, where he was from. He pictured the lake, the cabins on a little hill, and "saw" the auditorium in which church members held early morning prayer meetings.

One morning, while he and a friend went out on the lake in a boat, he noticed how peacefully the fog was resting on the placid water. The noise from the oarlocks was muffled by the fog as they sat quietly and fished. From the hilltop, he could hear the strains of the old Gospel hymns. They sounded so sweet in the soft, cool morning air, he sense the peace of God. Now, as he walked around the pitcher's mound, his mind replayed the scene from long ago, and once again he was filled with peace. The batter at the plate was becoming fidgety and tense. "And then," Carl said, "I felt the old power coming back again. I was in the flow. I felt that I was in harmony with God and," he said, "I whizzed the ball directly across the plate and heard the sweetest words in the world -- 'You're Out!'"²

<ARE WE THERE, YET?>

Just listen to these final verses in the Psalter again. This time from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*

"I'd like to see their bellies swollen with famine food, The weeds they've sown harvested and baked into famine bread, With second helpings for their children and crusts for their babies to chew on.

And me? I plan on looking you full in the face. When I get up, I'll see your full stature and live heaven on earth.

² Norman Vincent Peale. "Got a no-hitter." *Ibid.*, Part III. 35.

That is hope. That is the destination. That is the belief we will get there and things will be better. And not only will our problems be solved. Not only will our questions be answered. Not only will we be living heaven here on earth. We will see God and we will know we have arrived at our destination. Now that is hope.

<ARE WE THERE, YET?>

My older daughter Charissa, had eye surgery when we lived in Texas. Her eye muscles were weak, causing her eye to turn outward. Our doctor there said, "I'll do my best." When he finished the surgery, her eye was turning in.

We moved to California, and because her eye was not improving, we sought help again. By this time, she was having to wear a very heavy lens. We found a pediatric ophthalmologist, who worked on nothing but children's eyes. He gave us about the same hope as the Texas physician: "I'll do my best, but no scar tissue has built up. It will be difficult once I get in there. So I want to tell you ahead of time that it could turn all the way in or out -- in one direction or the other. Just be ready."

As all fathers are, I was convinced that God was going to make everything all right. She came out of surgery bloody, swollen, and bruised. I wanted her to open her eye. I remember standing by the bedside and saying, "Honey, can you open your eye for Daddy? Open it." Her mother and I anxiously awaited that first peek.

Finally, the eye lid came open. The eye was turned all the way in -- right against her nose! All one could see was the white part of her eye.

I hit bottom!

I'll tell you, that was one of the lowest moments in my life. Honestly, I did not know how to cope with it. I said to Cynthia, "I'm going."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered. "I'm just leaving."

I got into the car and drove to my office. I went inside the study, put my "Do Not Disturb" sign on the knob, and locked the doors. My secretary tried to come in and I told her to go away. I was extremely depressed.

A very close friend talked to my wife and took a chance at finding me in my study. He came by, expressed his genuine concern, and said, "Come on, let's get out of here." He put his arm around me, and we got into his car. He didn't say a lot; we just drove. No sermons and no commands to "snap out of it." Just quietness.

About two or three hours later, we went back to the hospital. "I'm really going to commit this thing to the Lord," he told me. "But we have to wait on Him. We've got to trust Him, Chuck." It was wise counsel from a man I love deeply.

We went back to my daughter's hospital room. The night passed. In the morning, we looked again at her eye. It was straightening up! When the ophthalmologist checked her later and analyzed her condition, he said, "Her fusion is perfect. We'll take her out of glasses." To this day, her eyesight is absolutely perfect.

Now, I don't know why I have never learned that lesson permanently. I guess it's that part of the fallen humanity in me. Have you ever had to learn a lesson twice? Would you believe seven or eight times?

We waited. We could do nothing. There was no one but the Lord to turn to. I had the finest surgeons who specialized in children's eyes. He warned me. I had to exchange my weakness of God's strength, even though I didn't deserve the exchange. I simply said, "It is impossible, Lord; You do it." And He did.³

<ARE WE THERE, YET?>

We may not be there yet, but reading this Psalm reminds us that we're getting there. The Destination is what keeps us going because in the end we can trust in God.

<ARE WE THERE, YET?>

No – not quite but believing we're getting there gives us hope. Amen.

³ Charles Swindoll. "Daughter has eye surgery." *Ibid.*, 11.