

## “In the Meantime”

I have been working in a church since September of 1972. And in those thirty-six years, I have never that I can recall taken more than an isolated weekend off in October. It's such a busy program time; and of course I am way too important for things to work without me. But this year the summer was steadily demanding with various things, so Priscilla and I planned some October time away. And the great staff team we have here not only didn't miss a beat; they raised the bar a couple of notches while I was gone. “Wow,” I've heard a number of times, “you really missed it!” That's music to my ears.

Priscilla and I did something we had been talking about for years: a great AMTRAK odyssey, beginning on the California Zephyr at scenic Osceola, Iowa, heading west through Omaha, Denver and the Rocky Mountains to Salt Lake City. There we spent two nights with friends, before heading on across the Sierra Nevada to Sacramento. Then we changed trains to the Coastal Starlight and rode it all the way north to Seattle—a city neither of us had ever visited—where we slept very well, thank you, and had two rainless days to enjoy the city. Then it was “all aboard” the Empire Builder from Seattle in late afternoon, and on through the Cascades just as daylight was beginning to fade. We woke up the next morning as we approached Glacier National Park. On we went through Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin and finally into Chicago. Everywhere we went the weather was great (including some early season snow in Montana) and the fall colors were at their peak. Last Sunday evening we arrived back at Osceola, having traversed fourteen states in ten days. Cool!

This kind of train travel is an odd combination of simplicity and grandeur. We had sleeping accommodations and meals on the train, which felt luxurious. But the limited space requires you to step out into the corridor in order to change your mind, and introduces the traveler to the relationship between personal hygiene and gymnastics. Minimalist packers like my wife thrive in these circumstances. It's rather like camping on wheels; that's the simplicity part.

The grandeur, of course, was in the views. There were consistently amazing vistas unfolding before us. Trains, when you think about it, always seem to run through the bowels of cities; so we saw some pretty stark urban scenes. But they also travel mostly along water, following the path of rivers. And much of the journey was through wild and remote areas. Overall you get a pretty balanced view, if you're paying attention.

And we were. We both brought along books that we intended to read and mostly didn't. Instead we sat, enthralled, and watched the scenery go by hour after hour, soaking it in as parched land would take in a gentle rain. And we experienced an overwhelming sense of gratitude. I believe we were surprised at the holiness of the experience; at least I was surprised. I hate the misuse of this word, but here it applies: awesome.

The people were interesting, too. Each meal we were paired with different folks. Some of them talked incessantly, managing to make it through up to an hour and a half

without once asking us a question about ourselves. But we also met some friendly UCC folks from Pennsylvania, and an astounding woman from Los Angeles who calls herself “Uncle Ruthie” and writes children’s music and hosts a radio show in L.A.

Then there was a young couple one day at breakfast. He had letters tattooed on his fingers, spelling out HOME on one hand and SICK on the other. I tried to figure out the proper word order to determine whether he was heading toward where he came from or away from it. His traveling companion was conspicuously pregnant. The absence of jewelry left us to wonder, in a way that was none of our business, about their relationship. English was their language of choice, but they chose to use it only sparingly and only on each other. There’s a story there, but we’ll never know what it is.

But mostly it was the world around us that told the story; or perhaps it would be truer to say it offered a visual symphony, every so often introducing and developing a completely new theme, then somehow tying it all back together with an exquisite beauty that would almost break your heart.

We preferred the observation car, which offered a panoramic view of our surroundings, where we could sit together in silence for hours, almost oblivious to the passage of time. But it was also the lounge car, offering regular reminders that in some respects train travel is like bus travel with alcohol. There were times when well-lubricated folk nearby seemed to need to fill up every spare moment with noise. One young man in particular tried to fill the whole car—the whole world!—with his expansive personality. So intense was his need to be impressive that the overall effect was suffocating. He took almost no notice of the scenery except for an occasional visual cue that launched him into another monologue about himself. He might as well have been traveling through a long, dark tunnel. Maybe he was. Eventually we relocated to a place of refuge, and I said to Priscilla, “I think my ears are bleeding.”

Of course I realized immediately that there have been times in my life when I have been that man. Our lives swallow us up sometimes: with grief or loss, with anxiety, with loneliness, with guilt, with our need for love and approval. We live sometimes in dark tunnels of our own creation, deafened by the absurd echoes of our own inner turmoil.

This can happen to anyone; and so one of the greatest gifts we can give to others is, when they are ready, to listen calmly until they find the way to their own inner silence. This particular man isn’t ready yet, but one day he will be; or so I pray.

I also think we have some choice about whether to live with our tunnel vision—or tunnel blindness. And sometimes we all need to be reminded of the presence all around us and within us, of the One who fills us and keeps us from having to fill the world around us; the One we encounter in stillness and in what the scriptures call the “beauty of holiness.” Worship is intended to offer that sort of reminder on a weekly basis.

What a shame and a sadness it is to travel through life unaware! How tragic to be on a journey of exquisite beauty and not to be able to notice. As Christians we are called to live between two worlds: the world of things as they appear and the world of meaning that those things reveal about who we are and where we’re going. Surely God is in this place, calling us to an awareness of the holy, to compassion for all creation, and toward

the understanding that our lives are not ends in themselves, but journeys of growth in love of God and neighbor. We know all this; but sometimes we forget.

I actually think this is what the Apostle Paul is driving at in his first letter to the Thessalonians, although he uses different imagery for it. Paul employs the language of eschatology, of the end times, in trying to convey to the early Christian community that we live between two worlds, between the world that is no longer and the world that is not yet. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ mark the beginning of the end of the old world of empires and power plays and political and economic systems in which the many serve the few. Christ embodies and signals the first faint beginnings of the Reign of God, a reign for which we pray every time we say, “thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The full realization of God’s will is coming, says Paul—coming in the time when Christ will come to reign. This hope will be realized at some unknown future time; but even now there is evidence of it... everywhere.

That evidence is even found in places like the church at Thessalonica, where they received Paul’s preaching with eagerness and enthusiasm, and where that word took hold in such a way as to demonstrate the presence and power of the Spirit of God: “... our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction...” So this fledgling church of early Christians became imitators of Paul—apprentices in the faith—as Paul himself was an imitator of Christ. And in this way the Thessalonians became a living message to the world about the coming reign of Jesus Christ. They were trying to live here and now as a part of the reality to come.

As we read in this letter beyond this morning’s lesson, we discover that living in this way as followers of Jesus Christ brought the Thessalonians into conflict with the community around them. Thessalonica was a city that enjoyed a special relationship with Emperor Augustus, whose various titles included “lord” and “savior.” To insist that there is someone else more rightly called “lord” and more truly designated “savior” got the early Christians into trouble and created friction in the communities in which they lived.

Paul preached and probably believed literally in a coming end to history. I Thessalonians is Paul’s earliest letter. It is the oldest writing in the New Testament—about a decade earlier than the first written gospel. But even at this early date, year 50 or 51 of the Common Era, Christians were concerned about the delay in the second coming of Christ. Paul writes to encourage them to be steadfast in their faith, secure in their hope and constant in their love. Christ will come with shout of acclamation (the imagery in the hymn is borrowed from later imagery in this letter) and the full reign of God will be realized. In the meantime, live in the here and now with a full awareness of what is to come.

The outcome, says Paul, is not in doubt. We know where the train is going. But, like AMTRAK, God only knows when it will get there. In the meantime live in faith, hope and love.

This message is particularly relevant to these days in which we live—a time of anxiety and fear. Markets rise and fall. “Securities” seem insecure. “Futures” are uncertain. “Worth” seems to be in question. Do you notice how the economic world uses

this theological language as though our security or future or worth were a number? Have you seen that commercial where folks walk around with their own individual retirement numbers as though there were a specific measurable point at which all will be well?

There are fears behind fears these days as numbers melt away, and with them perhaps some of our assurance. Retirement: I'm afraid I'll be a burden to my children (although some days I think I might like to try it for a little while); and what if I can't live in the style I've always imagined? What then? Education: we want our children and grandchildren to lead happy, fulfilled lives with no option closed to them... almost as though no college graduate were ever unhappy.

The plain truth is that security is not a number; that education can't make you happy; that material satisfaction has precious little to do with spiritual contentment. I know that in times of great anxiety these words seem like they're just words. But they're the right words.

Even in times like these we do not have to think we're traveling through a dark tunnel. Even now we don't have to let anxiety about the imagined destination rob us of delight in the journey. We're still between here and there—that much never changes.

In the meantime, travel simply. Enjoy the ride.

Amen

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