

How to Make the Journey

Second Sunday of Advent – 2 Peter 3:8-15a

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 7, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Last week, I hope some of you remember, we talked about life in general, and Advent in particular being all about the journey. I said, with the Apostle Paul, that we have a final destination, but just as Advent is the gift of preparation for our celebration of the Incarnation, God come to be with us, to be one of us, time itself is a gift from God, to give us the room to live, room to learn, room to love. What's more, Paul said to us in last week's Epistle reading, though God has promised to be faithful to the end of time, he has also promised to strengthen us and to be our companion along the journey to end of our days and to the end of time itself.

I have told you many times from this desk over the last nearly three years, that my habit has always been to use the Gospel readings as my preaching text. Looking back over the course of, as of last evening's St. Nicholas Mass, nineteen years as a priest and adding some months preaching regularly as a deacon and a handful of sermons as a seminarian, I'd guess that well into the mid-ninety percent of my preaching has been from the Gospels. But this year, I decided to break out of that mold and gave myself the challenge of delving more deeply into the Epistle readings of the Lectionary.

One reason was to get to better know St. Paul, our patron, since the vast majority of the Epistles are attributed to him. So here we are, in only the second Sunday of the new Church Year, and our Epistle reading is from *Peter*, not Paul. Oh well, "the best laid plans..." But Peter, it turns out, is making the same point I emphasized last week. We *are* on that journey. Time *has* an end. God is *with* us on our journey. *But*, he adds, how we conduct ourselves in the time we have been given, how we *make* our journey, matters, and matters very deeply.

I think that some of you thought that my choice of a long-distance retreat on the *Greyhound* was an ill-informed decision, the product of an unfortunate lack of information, if not deliberate stupidity. I think this, because some of you actually *told* me you thought I was nuts. What most of you *didn't* know, however, is that before I took my latest excursion to California and back, I was already an *expert* on how to survive the long-distance bus travel. Back in my college days, when a plane ticket from Baltimore to Phoenix was *hundreds* of dollars and a bus ticket was fifty-four, I did *all* my back-and-forthing on the Greyhound. Admittedly, my skeletal and muscular systems were in a whole other state back then, but still I have a *lot* of experience with fifty-some hour bus trips. What's more, last month was not my first bus-bound *retreat*. In 2010 I used a Greyhound program called the Discover America Pass to crisscross around the southwest and plains for nearly fifteen days without spending a single night in a hotel.

So I know some of the finer techniques of traveling the highways with several *dozen* companions. One of the keys is knowing how to improve your personal comfort. It is essential, for example, to do what you can to maintain your right-of-use for both seats on your side of the bus, which involves choosing carefully where to put your carry-on stuff (checking bags is for *beginners*) and learning to convincingly feign sleep anytime new passengers are getting aboard – after all, given a choice, no one is going to wake a sleeping college kid, *or* a scruffy-looking old man. It is also a must to master the various postures (some would say *contortions*) available in a bus seat. If you have been successful in keeping your two seats, you might be able to pull off one of the pseudo-laying-down positions – though those are generally for the younger, more limber crowd. Or you might take advantage of the seat-and-a-half slouch. And if you have indeed kept it with you, ignoring the driver's pleas to put baggage in the overhead rack, you might even spend hours and miles slumped over your backpack.

If, on the other hand, because the bus is full, or because you got caught faking sleep, you have surrendered your second seat, your first line might be leaning against the window – assuming you haven't made the rookie mistake of choosing a seat with a pillar across the window. When that gets tiresome, and

if your new best friend hasn't reclined his or her seat and you have, you can lean the other way against the side of your companion's seat – provided of course, that they aren't looking your way – that is *very* uncomfortable. If you are perturbed with having to share the seat for an especially long stretch (say, Memphis to Little Rock – just for example) with someone who is taking up more than what you are willing to grant as their allotted space, you might use the resentful clutch, not touching *anything* by turning yourself into a personal burrito of sorts. As a last resort, you might even lean forward to rest your head on the back of the seat in front of you, though – fair warning –one good bump *will* cause rug burn to your shiny forehead.

The real challenge, however, is your *attitude* toward the journey. Maybe it doesn't surprise *you*, but every time I get on the bus, I'm surprised by the number of people that will readily talk to strangers about having been to prison. On the stretch from Dallas to Sweet Water, Texas, I got to hear a couple of young people, still in their teens comparing the conditions at their two youth detention facilities, and how to get around the rules and get over on the guards. During the second night on the westward journey, I had to listen to the too-loud recollections of three men, one of whom looked to be in his mid-thirties but claimed to have already spent a total of thirteen years in prison, and how every moment of their hard lives was someone *else's* fault. I lost my second seat in Kansas City, to a young man in brand-new khaki work clothes, wearing well-worn cheap boots, and with eyes that never really looked at anyone. Daryl had spent a year in prison, for "possession," was all he ever said. On the *day after Thanksgiving*, he was on his way home to his wife and his two daughters – three and five. He was looking forward to his wife's cooking, and to his daughters' hugs, and to his own soft bed. "When you go to jail," he said, "the clock just kind of stops." "I'm just looking forward to seeing them," he said, "and *being* the person they always *thought* I was." He seemed incredibly glad to be on the journey again.

I'm not saying that life is like a bus trip. That would be too easy, and hardly anyone would believe that. I'm just quoting our Epistle writer, who's not Paul, but still... "What sort of persons ought you to be," he said "in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God." It might be a long trip, or he might come like a thief in the night. You might as well learn to get comfortable.