

Sunday, September 9, 2007

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Roland P. Perdue, III



José is Back!

Jeremiah 30:1-7, 10-11; 31: 31-34

Where did he come from? Upriver, probably. From some distance away. Far away. It took him 200 years to get back here. Do you think there is such a thing as collective consciousness or memory in his species? Could that be the reason he has returned? Is there somewhere within his being an unaware awareness, an unconscious consciousness of this place?

Surely it does not look the same as when his kind where here before. Then it was rural, almost wilderness, largely empty of our kind, clean and bright, abounding with life. The banks were treed and lush with foliage. Then there was a mate to be found, a lodge to be built from his cuttings, a family to raise.

Now, after much of the river became a dumping ground for abandoned cars and rubber tires, there has been an effort to clean it up. Now the river is stocked with 45 species of fish. The biologists who discovered the beaver named him José after United States Representative José E. Serrano of the Bronx. And now José the Beaver, lives just steps from a parking lot and a crowded intersection. Houses dot the river. Cars speed past. The river is spanned by highways and bridges. After 200 years José has returned to New York City. Maybe this time he will stick around.

Our story is very much like his. We have been in most places we will go to before. While driving to Texas and back last month, Jane and I passed or stopped at many places alive with memory. And in so many of them – for instance, where we were when Jane’s father and mother died, where we spent the night when learning we were losing a baby, and where the sun came up on us our first morning as a married couple – we understood where we were now as though for the first time. We have a clearer perspective of what certain events in our lives have done to change and mature us in the intervening years. Nothing that happens to us is ever really through happening to us, I believe. And we know ourselves as for the first time.

It is like the fable story of the Garden of Eden. That dream-like paradise is not so much a metaphor of our beginning as it is a metaphor of where we can, God willing, end up as we move forward into what God has prepared for us so long ago in our beginning. T. S. Eliot says it this way:

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this
Calling*

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

*Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree...*

– T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets: Little Gidding*

Yes! At the end of all our exploring, we will arrive where we started and know the place for the first time. I do believe that is existentially true.

Certainly it was true for the North American beaver, forced out of town two centuries ago by agricultural development and overeager fur traders. José returned to New York City, built a lodge in the Bronx River and was photographed swimming in the river this past February. José is back! After 200 years! And so too are wild turkeys, deer and coyotes and other wild animals sighted roaming the banks of the Bronx River.

And it was true for those who left Babylonian captivity and returned home to Jerusalem and Judea. Some had never been there before; they were born in slavery and captivity. But their parents had thrilled them with stories of the way it was back home before “The Troubles.” And those returning were convinced that Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian Warrior King, had freed them only under the promptings of their God, Yahweh. The power of the Babylonian government was coming to an end, but God’s covenant with Israel would last forever.

And as they faced the long journey homeward, they heard the encouraging and bold words from the prophet Jeremiah: “Why has every face grown pale? (Why do you cry?) Disaster! This is a great day, no other like it ... In tears (you) shall return, in prayer I shall lead (you). I shall guide (you) to streams of water, by a smooth path where (you) shall not stumble. For I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born son” (Jeremiah 30:6b-7; 31:9). God will bring them back home! And shortly, the day would dawn when “the people of Israel and the people of Judah shall come together, weeping as they come, and they shall seek the Lord their God” (Jeremiah 50:4). O, what a glorious day! The profound longing of all peoples is to return home and at the end of all exploring to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

*Homeward bound,
I wish I was,
Homeward bound,
Home, where my
thought's escaping,
Home where my music's playing,
Home where my love lies waiting
Silently for me.
Silently for me.*

– Paul Simon

And when they came within sight of their Promised Land of Return and saw their beloved city, their hearts broke. It was an ungodly mess. Like abandoned cars and ruined rubber tires along the banks, the trash and broken hopes and shattered dreams were everywhere. Their city had no infrastructure. The walls were in heaps, the Temple a disaster. The streets were dusty paths filled with weeds. “Homeward bound!”

What a disastrous letdown! They must have been overwhelmed with the sheer size of the mammoth repairs they would have to make, the long and hard work to get back to the innocence of being back at their beginning.

And here we are. Back here again on another Homecoming Sunday. Back to celebrate our return to another year in this magnificent cityscape. And in a profound sense, here at the end of our exploring we have come back to that place from which we started and

we shall know this place as for the first time.

Our God-given task is the same as given to those Jewish sisters and brothers of ours returning home from their captivity. This wonderful church and city are ours to enhance and embrace as in Christ we return to our innocence as when we were children in the apple tree and our hopes and dreams were all ahead of us. We come to affirm once again that the best days for the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church are still ahead of us and to insist that we can make a difference in this city.

This wonderful church is graced Sunday after Sunday by members and friends from the East, South, North, West and all points in between. We have some here this morning who attend only occasionally. But this is their home. We are all here because this is “home.” Take a single page from our membership roll, as I did this week, and here is where our members live – all over the tri-state area, and Seattle, WA, Atlanta, GA, Charleston, WV, St. Paul, MN, Fairfax, CA, and so on. That is wonderful, especially if they are also active in their local neighborhoods and churches. This is home. And isn’t it satisfying to realize that the influence of this particular church never ends throughout this nation and much of this world? That is why we worship at the crossroads of the world!

I spend a lot of time walking the streets of New York City and meditating in a pew over there in this sanctuary. These are the thoughts my soul copes with. I see a man entering our worship service obviously on the raw edge of desperation. He knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing. And over there a woman whose compromises have robbed her sense of self worth and integrity. And over there is a couple worried sick about their marriage. They are in counseling, but the marriage continues to slide away from earlier passion and a degree of warmth and affection. Up there as far away as they can get are folks losing their mortgage. Here and there are people whose breath smells of the drink they had for breakfast in order to have enough bottled courage just to face another day and get here. Hungry, homeless, confused by the city, pregnant without purpose or partner, under employed, over employed, unemployed, on and on until every one is included.

And they all came here needing Jesus and hoping to God for a good word, a strong embrace as they worship. And I wonder, what do we give them?

We are called as a faith community to embrace this city and broken world; we are called to be servants of a Servant Lord. And everything we are here and do here must be done from that motivation – servanthood! – or we will forever be ticking ears with tedium rather than the tremendous word of the Gospel. Our message, our manner, our mission has to be Jesus and not a list of activities, nor priorities that are self-serving or self-preserving. We are to give away all we have and are in servant hood as we follow our Servant Lord Jesus Christ.

Anna Quindlen in her novel *Rise and Shine* writes:

“There are three kinds of people who live in New York City. There are the ones who will leave as soon as they can, and the ones who will never leave. There are two groups of that second kind: the ones who are trapped by circumstances, and those who are trapped by love. I am of the second variety.” (p. 67)

Her observation can be applied to this church. Some leave as soon as the going gets rough. Others of us are trapped by love of Christ, love of each other, and love of this church and her ministry. And like the beaver José we have come home again to repair relationships, to sing a new song in the land of the living, to proclaim the Gospel of the all inclusive love affair God has with all people, and to open the doors of this “Church that Never Stops Serving” in this “City that Never Sleeps!”
Amen.

Note: If you were present in the Sanctuary when this sermon was preached or if you heard it on the church’s website, then you know that this may not exactly be the sermon you heard. This is a written sermon, and it is different in form and emphasis from a preached and heard sermonic effort within the context of worship. The various activities of worship – gathering, praying, singing, reading the sacred story together, participating in the holy drama and leaving to engage the routine events of one’s life – add to the overall meaning of the sermon.

Sermons are not written to be read. I write the sermon out as a discipline. However, when the writing is over, the work of learning the sermon is just beginning. As you read this and other sermons, your work is also just beginning. Having read the sermon, what difference does it make in your attitudes, actions and the adventure of living before God and others? Struggling with that may help actually “finish” the sermon.

Come and be present with us as we worship God in the Spirit of Jesus Christ!

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