

The Trip to Bountiful

The Reverend Dr. Catharine Randall Christ Church, Middle Haddam

“This is what the Lord says:
‘Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.
Make your praises heard, and say,
‘O lord, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.
See, I will bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.
Among them will be the blind and the lame,
expectant mothers and women in labor;
a great throng will return.
They will come with weeping;
they will pray as I lead them back.
I will lead them beside streams of water
on a level path where they will not stumble.” Jer 31: 7-8

I never went to my grandmother’s funeral. I wasn’t there when she died. I had just given birth to my daughter, her name sake (at least the middle name). It was a complicated time. I was terrified I’d be a lousy mother. I was stressed, tired, excited and ecstatic all at once. After the funeral, my mother arrived to help. We quarreled, as mothers and daughter will. (I have continued this tradition with Sara, my daughter.) But I never saw my grandmother before she died. I never got to say goodbye.

The day she died was beautiful and clear, I am told. My grandmother had been in the nursing home for months, where she did not ‘go gently into this dark night.’ She ‘raged against the dying of the light.’ She was not a pleasant person to be around when she was not happy, my grandmother, but she knew what she wanted, what she needed, and she always ended up getting her way! So on that day, early in the morning, my uncle came to take her home. It was just for a visit. A trip to Bountiful.

My grandmother saw her home, her farm, her fields, with the lovely New England sycamores and the pastures where Blackie the old horse had trod. She saw the chicken coops standing empty, and the goat field gone to seed. She saw the yellowing wallpaper in the living room and the enamel washbasin and the tired old stove. She saw the wooden cigar store Indians standing sentinel in the back room. She saw her own little room up under the eaves, and the room where her “pretty birds,” lovebirds and canaries, had fluttered about her head and perched on her fingers to delight her. And then, my grandmother died. A trip to Bountiful.

In the reading from Jeremiah, the exiles from Jerusalem, those who were driven out and imprisoned for long, sad years in Babylon, are also coming home. My Uncle Howie is not leading them, but God is bringing them home. God is their steward, He who delivers them.

Stewardship is *the care of what we have been given* not, to my mind, the paltry bit that what we give. This will be an unorthodox—or perhaps, really orthodox! – stewardship sermon, because I am not going to talk to you about giving money. I am going to talk to you about coming home. If stewardship is the care of what we’ve been given then, first and foremost, stewardship must mean *the care of the soul*, to use Thomas Moore’s title. After all, Jesus said, “Tear down this building, and I will raise it up again in three days.” He didn’t mean the temple, he didn’t mean the this church – he meant his body, the temple of his soul. And there He is! Look at him! It’s the care of what we’ve been given that will never die. The key is to find that and cling to it, nurture and cultivate it ... Because we ALL lose it, it goes missing ... ESPECIALLY for those of us who believe.

We need to be led back out of exile, brought home from the nursing home, back out of our black night, our self-justifying, our self-loathing, our second guessing ... and Jesus will do that. He says, ‘don’t lose me. Don’t let yourself lose me.’ I say, ‘Lord, don’t let me lose you ... How could I have ever thought you would lose me?’

We can lay that worry to rest. In Jesus, that will never happen. It cannot. It is an impossibility– for with him, all things ARE possible.

So here we come walking, my grandmother with her walker, shuffling her Parkinson’s shuffle, today we come walking, slowly, some limping, scarred, we are all scarred by life– all wounded, all yearning, reaching, we come walking

“They will come with weeping.

They will pray as I lead them back.

I will lead them besides streams of water

on a level path where they will not stumble”

Our Lord leading us home.

Look at him. Look at those arms outstretched.

Who could not love him, loving us so dearly?

And THAT is stewardship: the joyous response to a loving God.

May we deal gently with our past
Greet the present moment with joy
and dwell in hope and expectation for the future.
In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.+