

North-Prospect United Church of Christ  
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"Going Back. Not"  
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## Scripture

At the end of the forty days they returned from spying out the land. And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites...they brought back word to them and to all the congregation and showed the fruit of the land. And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large...(Numbers 13:25-28).

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword?" ...So, they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt." (Numbers 14:1-4).

And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them..." (Numbers 14:11-12).

But Moses said..."Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now." (Numbers 14:19).

Then the Lord said: "I do forgive, just as you have asked; nevertheless---as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord--none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt...and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it." (Numbers 14: 20-24).

"But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in the wilderness...you shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness... According to the number of days you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, and you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and shall know my displeasure." (Numbers 14:33-34).

## Sermon

I cannot preach a word from this pulpit without thanking this congregation for the way you have accepted and encouraged me. Your support is very meaningful and touching. I thank you for it.

Similarly, I would not be here today without the patient guidance and counseling of Dudley Rose. Since I approached him for advice during my first year in divinity school and up until this moment, the generosity of his spirit, the constancy of his caring and the depth of his wisdom and faith have been inspirational.

Your care of me will always be a call to live up to and to live out the example set by this congregation and by you, Dudley.

Although I do have to say that your sermons, Dudley, and the recent sermons by Reebee and Michele set a preaching standard for this pulpit which has caused me no small anxiety today.

Further, it is important, I believe, that you all know of another input which shapes my preaching. It comes from my Mother--the daughter of a Methodist minister and a veteran of many sermons.

Two years ago, as she was about to enter her 90's, I went home for a visit at the time of the spring festival in my hometown in southern Mississippi. I left there at the age of 17 to be a great college running back and track star (I tasted the bitterness of defeat early in life) and in each visit since then---whether it was on leave from the Navy in the Vietnam War era (during which I was an advisor to the Vietnamese Navy), during law school at the University of Virginia, or during my time as a lawyer in Houston and Washington, D. C.--often returning with one of my three children or my wife---I have stayed in touch with my hometown roots. In this county seat town, with a population of 2,000, the annual festival's parade comes down Main Street. Mother and I were standing just across from the court house square as the junior misses---the winner and 1st, 2nd and 3rd runners up--came by sitting in the convertibles. Bands from around the county followed. As the music faded and the numerous floats began to cruise by, my Mother turned to me and said in that voice which never fails to get my attention:

So, you're called to be a minister. I'll tell you something. People will come to church on Sunday to hear what you have to say. They will get out of bed; they will organize and dress their children; they will forego all kinds of things to be there. Many will have worked all week long and many will be tired. And, what you need to realize, is that they will bring with them their concerns about their work, their friends, their futures and, most importantly, their family members. You will know only a few of these things that trouble the people with you--including those you think you know well. Secret concerns will be locked in their hearts and will be known only to God. Each person there will be carrying a burden they feel they cannot unload or share. Son, your sermon must comfort those who come.

And, with that, she turned back to the parade leaving me forever burdened with her instruction.

Please join me in prayer:

O God, help us say and hear your Word in ways that draw us closer to you. Amen.

Well, with all that introduction, you may ask: Will there be a sermon today? Yes, there will be one and let's turn to it.

I've adopted an orphan concept today: God's demand that we not go back. The title "Going Back. Not" was chosen to remind us of the currency of the living Word and to keep us from being lost in the ancientness of the Scriptural stories.

God expresses this "don't go back" mandate in several passages, but always in a supporting role. Like those of us with birthdays shortly after Christmas, the "don't go back" concept never has its own day; legitimately, it is overshadowed by more important events.

Let's look at some of the places in the Bible where this concept shows up.

There is the famous New Testament statement: "And having been warned in a dream *not to return to Herod*, they left for their own country *by another road*." (Matt. 2:12) Who would preach on the instruction to the wise men to go home a different way rather than proclaim the message of Christmas?

In I Kings, a person identified simply as the "Man of God" rides from the Southern Kingdom to the Northern Kingdom to preach against the altars and golden calves of Jeroboam--the apostate king of the North. God said: "You shall not eat food, or drink water, *or return by the way that you came.*" (I Kings 13:9). The "Man of God" violated this instruction and met his death on the way home. Does one preach on the colorful story of Jeroboam or on the more mundane "going back" aspect?

Biblical stories of King David and King Solomon are a treasure trove of sermon material. A minister rummaging around in this area would be ill-advised to preach on the "Law of Kings" set forth in Deuteronomy. In that law, God, speaking through Moses, instructs that: "he [the king of Israel] must not...return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, '*You must never return that way again.*'" (Deut. 17:16-17).

And, let us not forget Lot's wife. In the often-preached-about story of Sodom and Gomorrah, God tells Lot and his family: "Flee for your life; *do not look back*...flee to the hills or else you will be consumed." (Genesis 19:17). All she did was *glance* back. And what a great symbol of human

immobility that story gives us--a pillar of salt stuck there amid chaos with others going by and the hills of refuge within sight. Do not even look back.

These negative prohibitions against going back are reinforced throughout the Bible by God's calls to move on. The positive call is, in effect, the other side of the "not going back" coin. Two examples--Abraham and Jesus--illustrate this. In the basic covenant with Abraham in Genesis, he is promised blessing, fame, and even told that through him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12). For all of this, Abraham is asked only to "*Go* from your country and your kindred and your father's house *to the land that I will show you.*" Just go where I direct, God is saying, and your fate will be assured.

And, who is surprised to find, that Jesus--with an economy of words so typical of his powerful preaching--points the way (and excludes the wrong way) when he says to disciples and other seekers: "Follow me..." (Matthew 4:19). Follow me into a future that God directs.

But the example that brings me to fear and trembling is in the story of the spies from today's Scripture reading. As the tribe of Israel drew near, they sent out spies to do reconnaissance on the

occupants of "their" promised land. The reports were not encouraging, as you heard: "the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large..." (Numbers 13:28).

You heard the response of the congregation of Israel to the report of the spies: "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt." (Numbers 14:1-4.) This group who wanted to go back to Egypt has been known through the ages as the "Despised Generation."

God declared he would kill them all for their "faithlessness." Moses--in the classic prophetic role--talks with God and, in effect, says: "God, what will the neighbors think?" Moses had the Egyptians in mind. What will the neighbors think, God, if you destroy your own people who you worked so hard to bring out of Egypt? Plus, Moses reminds God of God's covenants with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob--God's promises to God's people.

The treatment the people so richly deserved was mitigated. And you heard God's judgment: "you shall suffer for your faithlessness...until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness...and you shall know my displeasure." (Numbers 14:33-34).

Whooooo. Are you feeling comforted yet?

It is hard to hear this story without getting the point that God is really not too keen on his people--the people he has aided--going back. Something there is in God that doesn't love a going back, altering, for this occasion, Robert Frost's great line about a wall.

And all they wanted to do was to go back to a place where their ancestors--led by Jacob, a patriarch--had gone voluntarily. Yes--how the Israelites came to Egypt in the first place---under Jacob's leadership, in search of food and a better life (Genesis 47:27)---and how long they stayed and thrived--around 400 years (Exodus 12:40)--are elements of the Exodus story not often emphasized, but I think they are of tremendous relevance to us today.

These people just wanted to go back to a place they understood--to a place of certainty, a place where their ancestors had lived. Facing a series of wars and possible loss of life to conquer the very land God had promised to them, the Israelites thought the prospect of stable servitude in Egypt looked pretty good. I have no trouble identifying with their thinking. How about you?

And already you see the parallels with our lives. We go voluntarily into the servitudes of today--those servitudes that eagerly await us in the complex world outside this Sanctuary. Like the Israelites to Egypt, we go willingly at first--perhaps anxiously, not sensing the danger. Over time, we become subjects of the tyrannical servitudes which we first found so compelling. But then, with the Grace of God, there come moments when each of us is brought to the realization that we are slaves to ungodly places (our physical Egypts), to unloving patterns of behavior (sometimes with those we profess to love the most), to abuse in its many forms, to the "isms" (workaholism, alcoholism, rageaholism), to the prejudices, and, yes--God forgive us--the hatreds which we have slipped into voluntarily and with which we have become so comfortable in ways large and small. And while professing Christ as our leader and proclaiming his message of love, we remain with these old tyrannical friends and enslavers knowing full well they do not have one bit of Christ in them. You know the things tangible and intangible which restrain you from the full life God intends. You--and only you--know what these things are in your life. It is the same for me.

As with those standing just outside the promised land thousands of years ago, God has worked mightily to bring us to this moment, this day and these times so rich with promise. Jesus has come to show us how to love God and how to love the people in God's creation. Through the

inspired efforts of predecessors---parents, grandparents, colleagues, friends, fellow seekers--not to mention people who are found to have worked in the church for 50 years--God has invested too much in us for us to go back. Going back is the worst kind of apostasy, for when we go back we say: "Thank you very little, God, for how far you have brought us."

One reason I am preaching this sermon today is to ask for your continued help in keeping me from going back. God willing and to the extent I can discern, I am not going back. Perhaps there are others here today who need help, as I do, not to go back; who need help resisting the powerful pull of a tyranny or two that has come into their lives. Can we help each other to "Go" like Abraham and to "follow" Jesus into the future? Is this not part of the comfort we can give each other?

And there is more good news and comfort around this topic for North-Prospect. You don't have it in you to go back. I believe that. I declare that here today. In the expression of your concern for the world around you and in your openness and acceptance of the unanticipated journeying souls--of whom I am but one--you demonstrate your commitment to the push of God and the love of Jesus Christ. When I see the canned goods at the back pews of this Sanctuary, when I hear you talk about getting the check ready to go to El Salvador, when I hear you at coffee hour express genuine concern

for each other and when I hear the sincere prayers offered by this congregation, there is no doubt about your direction. Why, in your history you have the powerful image of this very building coming forward on Mass. Ave. to find the land that God directed. No. There is no going back here and I have preached this sermon today to tell you that. Take refuge and comfort in the movement of this community toward God.

What is at stake here? It is not whether God's will will be done. Note that just 40 years after the knees of the Despised Generation buckled on the boundary of the Promised Land, their children fought for and occupied it. The question is how will we, in our times, participate in God's future. Decades from now, other names will fill the rolls of this church and other ministers will grip the sides of this pulpit. What label will they apply to our generation? Will it have the flavor of the wilderness or will it indicate we occupied high ground in the promised land of justice and love?

You are a realistic people who know how hard won even the smallest victories for justice and love can be. You know how life is always mixed with joys and suffering---the first cry of the newborn folds in with the screams of earthquake victims. You know from your own suffering and joys that for us to occupy the promised lands of love and justice and to taste its "milk and honey" we

will have to face down "strong" people defending their positions from "very large" fortresses. Yes, the future here will be uncertain in many senses, but for this place it will certainly be with God.

Like all preachers, I would not be disappointed if the Third Great Awakening could be traced to February 11 at North-Prospect Church in Cambridge. But we are not in a revival tent here, and I don't expect any of you to be "slain in the Spirit" at the end of this sermon. But, consistent with the way we are, I would like to make a modest suggestion. Go home a different way today! From this service, go home a different way, please. Whether you drive, walk, bike, bus or take the T, just see how it feels consciously to go home a different way--like the wise men, like the "Man of God" was told to do. And, if that feels good and somehow just slightly liberating and Godly, then tomorrow consider taking another step by identifying and dealing in some small way with something that holds you captive. Then be open to letting that process build. Perhaps weeks from now when we all sit down to chart the direction of this congregation--recognizing Jesus at the head of it--we will be poised to continue our forward movement into God's future. And when "going back" is suggested, we will be quick to say "not"--"not on my watch"; "not in my generation."

Hear and respond to the drumbeat: Do not return the way you came, do not return to Herod, different route, different road, never return that way again, do not look back, do not go back to Egypt, do not go back, Come, Follow Jesus, Go, But don't go back. Amen.