

“Go Back” Or “Go Forward”

Acts 1:1 – 11

Luke 24:44 – 53

The Ascension of Jesus cries to us, “Go forward into the future, when shoulders squared, heads up, and in the full confidence of the Holy Spirit.” But we put on the brakes. We cry, “Not so fast.”

There’s an anti-Ascension message loose in American Christianity: “Go back.” I ask you to concentrate with me on two phrases: “Go back” and “Go forward.”

Last week, a politician in Georgia told Stacey Abrams, “Go back to where you came from.” This is the problem that we face, this desire to tell others to go back to where they came from. It’s a wrong vision of the past. I can tell you with some sense of certainty that he wasn’t telling Ms. Abrams to go back to Mississippi – the state of her birth. He was using one of the most notorious of the racist tropes in our national history.

There is, in many people, a strong desire to go back to the good old days. There’s a word for this deep human desire: Nostalgia. The movie, *Midnight in Paris*, tells a story of nostalgia. A screenwriter, Gil Pender, is writing a novel while vacationing in Paris. Each night at midnight, Gil gets into a 1920’s car and experiences time-travel. He goes back in time to the Roaring Twenties. He is tempted to stay and live in the past. Gil finally realizes that chasing nostalgia is fruitless and returns to the present.

There’s a longing for a “bygone Christian golden age.” This is rooted in the illusion that America was founded as a Christian nation, that America is a Christian nation, and that Americans are God’s new chosen people. This is Christian nationalism. “Nostalgia freezes the past in images of timeless, childlike innocence.” It fails to recognize change over time. There’s an intellectual laziness involved in wanting things to stay the same, in rejecting new ideas, new ways of interpreting Scripture, and new

movements of the Holy Spirit. There's danger in attempting to reclaim a world that is disappearing and can't be salvaged.

For too long, American Christians of a particular bent, have engaged in an ideology of fear, the pursuit of worldly power, and a "nostalgic longing for a national past that may have never existed in the first place" (John Fea, *Believe Me*). Some Christians dream of the day when the economy was booming, when the culture was less open, the family looked like the Cleaver family on *Leave It to Beaver*, and public school children prayed and read the Bible at the start of each day (Fea, 130). Scholar Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as a "sentiment of loss and displacement" that "reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of historical upheavals."

As Jesus gave his final instructions for the future the disciples resisted. They brought up the old dream: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" The dream of a restored Israel, an Israel free of the Roman Empire, dominated first century thought. The disciples, even after matriculating in the school of Jesus for three years, long enough for a Master of Divinity degree, were still caught up in the old dream of power.

Jesus says, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." His final words became the constitution of the church. Instead of "Go back," Jesus delivered, "Go forward."

Historian David Blight asks, "Who do you know who really wants to compromise with their ideas? Who on the left will volunteer to be part of a delegation to go discuss violence and guns with Mitch McConnell, Kevin McCarthy or the commentators of Fox News? Who on the right will come to a symposium with 10 of the finest writers on democracy, its history, and its philosophy, and help create a blueprint for American response to violence?" As a

culture we are not in the mood for such reason and comity. We are a blame culture. "It's your fault" is our default setting.

There's a story in the Bible to show us the danger of nostalgia. The people said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone so that we can serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

No wonder we scream, "Go back to where you came from." Go back to Africa was the plea. I'm Irish and when my ancestors came to America, they were told "Go back to Dublin." When the Catholics came, "Go back to Europe you bunch of papists." When the Italians came, "Go back to Rome." When the Chinese came, "Go back to Peking." There is nothing subtle about the insult.

A Pakistani refugee in the British detective show, *Inspector Morse*, says to his father, "They don't want us here." Never forget that "go back" is the sister of "Stay in your place." And please never forget that "Go back" has been used to keep women in their place. It is a spatial trope designed to put women in their place.

In the United States today, many men are dreaming of going back to a time when they really were in charge, and they are pretending to be victims of a feminized culture. Affluent white males who oversee the levers of power are pretending PRECARIETY. (Paul Elliott Johnson, "The Art of Masculine Victimhood").

There something odd about white males feeling they are being replaced when we have a history in this country of the displacement of others. Ask the Cherokee, the Chickasaw, the Choctaw, the Muscogee, and the Seminoles about being displaced. "The Trail of Tears" is a awful blemish on the idea that we are a Christian nation. Ask Japanese Americans about being

displaced from their homes and robbed of their property and placed in camps during WWII. We have a history of displacing Others.

We are a nation fueled by displacing those we have the power to displace. And now our national sins are coming back to haunt us. Like Nebuchadnezzar, the writing is on the wall for white power. Recall the story from Daniel: "Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace, next to the lampstand. The king was watching the hand as it wrote. Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together." And this is the writing that was inscribed: mene, mene, tekel, and parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.' This is the judgment of God on empires, on secular power, and this is the writing on the wall of America. We can't escape our nightmares until we give up our illusions of being high and mighty and in charge of the handles of history.

Now do you see that we can't allow our vision to be rooted in the "good old days" – the days of glory and success and power? We are not called to be successful but faithful. We are not called to return to an idealized mythology of the past, but to move confidently into the future. I believe this is the church that Jesus formed, and I believe one, holy, catholic, apostolic church – as faithful witnesses – is our only reasonable hope.