

THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING

Psalm 122

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on The Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 6, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, the first Sunday during which the church was fully open after being highly restricted during the nearly eighteen months of the COVID 19 pandemic.

FOCUS TEXT

*I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'*
² *Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.*

³ *Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.*
⁴ *To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.*
⁵ *For there the thrones for judgement were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.*

⁶ *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
'May they prosper who love you.*
⁷ *Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.'*
⁸ *For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, 'Peace be within you.'*
⁹ *For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good.*

Earlier this week, when Jacob Bolton had noticed the text for today, he said, “Larry, when did you decide on Psalm 122?” I assumed he was referring to the opening line: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’” I told him I picked this Psalm about fifteen months ago, because I knew, I trusted, I believed, that the day would come when we would “return to the house of the Lord,” and I knew, I trusted, I believed, that we would be glad.

*I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us [return] to the house of the Lord!'*

But we are not all glad – or at least fully glad – as we might have envisioned being.

- The opening has come quicker – or at least with less notice – than most of us were expecting, leading many institutions across our country to scramble a bit on the logistical front.
- We know that not all are yet vaccinated, and children are not yet eligible for vaccination.
- Some of us are still nervous, and for good reason.

- Some of us are still nervous because we have been nervous for fifteen months and our bodies have just trained us to be cautious, careful, even fearful. We don't stand at a busy crosswalk twice a day, month after month, year after year, our bodies tense as we watch for an opening in traffic, and then suddenly one day stop watching carefully because that the traffic is diminishing and the chances of our being hit have diminished significantly.
- As we have lost family and friends, some to COVID, some to other maladies, we have all re-learned that we cannot ever be fully protected from the vicissitudes of life and nature, and perhaps of God's very being, as one is taken, and another left behind, for no apparent reason.
- And as we regather in this place, we are aware that some dear friends in the congregation have moved to places less urban and stressed; some have retired early and left the area; some have adopted well to basement life and only come up for air or sunlight about once a week; and the chancel is still absent a respected colleague.

Still, we are *able* to say, and we *do not hold back* from saying:

*I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us [return] to the house of the Lord!'*

As sudden as society's reopen has come, we are as a church and a society not so much "back to normal" as at "the beginning of a beginning" – a beginning that will hopefully expand, lead more of us to feel safe receiving vaccines, lead to vaccines or other measures that will keep children as safe as adults, and lead more of us to feel safe more of the time and in more of the places to which we venture, so that this "beginning of a beginning" will become a full "beginning" with a "middle" and an "ending" in which the "former things" of illness and disease, pandemic and death, are "passed away."¹

II.

Many of you know that the Sunday after Easter, Reverend Camille Cook and I exchanged pulpits: She preached at Westminster and I preached at Georgetown Presbyterian. We agreed in advance we would each preach on the topic "After COVID" – which at that time seemed almost "academic" and "far away" since no one really knew when the "after" would begin.

In my sermon at Georgetown I asked a series of long-term questions that are now before us and congregations all over the world since "the beginning of the beginning" is here:

- What is the difference between learning from a teacher at the other end of a screen and a person on the other side of a podium?
- Will we recover a deep sense of "life together" as congregations, or possibly even an enhanced sense?
- Will "virtual worship" and "virtual learning" run the risk of leading to "virtual faith"?
- Will families with children find – or without children for that matter – find it so much less stressful simply to "have Sunday School and church" at home, in pajamas, surrounded by pastries and pets? Will this lead children to only be in the Sanctuary when they "perform" at Christmas or Easter? Will church for them simply be one more experience of a screen?
- Will people for whom mobility, hearing, or seeing is difficult find it more rewarding to remain home where they can sit more comfortably and see and hear better; and if so, what do *they* and *we* miss from their physical presence in worship?

¹ Revelation 21:5.

- Will we recover the benefit of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless with our own hands and feet, looking into the eyes of the people we serve, seeing the face of Christ in their faces?
- Will we recover the benefit – *of clergy* – holding the hands of members as the “fever of life” leaves them, and “their work is done” and embracing their family members present for those most poignant moments?
- Will people who have been away from worship for over a year return, or might they become lost, if not forever, for the next period of their lives?
- Will others who have found us through livestreaming slowly find us in person as they are able and led to do?

All these and many more questions await us as we slowly but surely emerge from this most unusual and deadly crisis.

III.

These questions are challenging. They are a cause for concern for people like me who only know Westminster as a strong, highly personal, highly interconnected congregation. They are a cause for concern to congregations all over the country. They are also intellectually interesting; and they come with many opportunities to experiment, to try new things, to emerge from the next few years better and strong. But these questions are upon us and before us, and we cannot just ignore them or will them away and assume that church life will return to normal.

But even as these questions settle into pews, they do not detract from what brings us here today:

- The familiarity of the *liturgy*
- The ability to sing the *hymns of our faith*
- *Corporate* worship of the Creator of the earth and stars
- *Sacred space*
- *Faces* of friends whose names may only be on the tip of our tongues.

We are here because of the peace and community that Westminster has brought us for as many months or years as it has been our spiritual home and has brought this community for the eighty-one years we have been gathering every Sunday without ever cancelling a service – including the first Sunday of the pandemic – on this familiar corner between the old schoolhouse and new fire station.

We are here today because we are finally able to experience the *feeling* we’ve known when we have crossed the threshold into the Sanctuary before.

*I was glad when they said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’*

IV.

Twice in my ministry – once at its outset and once a few years ago – I have preached a sermon entitled “The Old Feeling.” It comes from the Hemingway short story “The Big Two-Hearted River.”² It describes Nick

² Ernest Hemingway, “The Big Two-Hearted River,” *In Our Time* (Boni and Liveright edition, 1925). Italics added.

Adams returning to his home of Seney, Michigan, on the Upper Peninsula, after serving in World War I, trying to recover from the trauma of what he has experienced as a teenager fighting an adult war. He discovers that his hometown has suffered a tremendous forest fire in his absence.³

The story opens with Nick getting off the train in Seney:

The train went on up the track out of sight, around one of the hills of burnt timber. Nick sat down on the bundle of canvas and bedding the baggage man had pitched out of the door of the baggage car. There was *no town*, nothing but the *rails* and the *burned-over country*. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was clipped and split by the fire. It was *all that was left* of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground.

Nick looked at the burned-over stretch of hillside, where he had expected to find the scattered houses of the town and then walked down the railroad track to the bridge over the river. *The river was there*. It swirled against the log spiles of the bridge. Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the *trout keeping themselves steady* in the current with wavering fins. As he watched them they changed their positions by quick angles, only to hold steady in the fast water again. Nick watched them a long time.

...At the bottom of the pool were the big trout. Nick did not see them at first. Then he saw them at the bottom of the pool, big trout looking to hold themselves on the gravel bottom in a varying mist of gravel and sand, raised in spurts by the current.

Nick looked down at the pool from the bridge. It was a hot day. A kingfisher flew up the stream. It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout. They were *very satisfactory*. As the shadow of the kingfisher moved up the stream, a big trout shot upstream in a long angle, only his shadow marking the angle, then lost his shadow as he came through the surface of the water, caught the sun, and then, as he went back into the stream under the surface, his shadow seemed to float down the stream with the current, unresisting to his post under the bridge, where he tightened, facing up into the current.

Nick's heart *tightened* as the trout moved. *He felt all the old feeling*.

What has brought so many of us back to Westminster has been what brought the traumatized young many from rural Michigan back to the trout stream of his childhood and now departed youth: "The old feeling." For us, "the old feeling" resides *here*. In *this* place. Among *these* people.

*I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us [return] to the house of the Lord!'*

V.

Two Sundays ago, one of our high school seniors, Michaela McCormick, provided a great imitation and "take down" of the gestures and diction she has observed in my preaching for the nearly eighteen years she has sat with her family in the front row seat in the balcony. But she also issued a simple, eloquent explanation

³ There is a town of Seney, which Hemingway visited as a youth. It had many forest fires, but never one that destroyed the town, though by the time Hemingway visited Seney, the timber industry had dried up and there was little remaining in the town. See Jack Jobst, "Hemingway in Seney," *Michigan History* (November/December 1990), available at <https://www.michiganhemingwaysociety.org/articlelinks/EHin%20Seney.htm>.

and challenge of why she was able to provide such an imitation as she challenged us all with two words: “Show up.”

“I did not always want to come [to church],” she said. “But I was sent anyway. It taught me something valuable: the impact of showing up.”

“To me faith is about community,” she continued. “And community is about showing up.”

“Thank you for being my community and thank you for letting me show up.”

“I’m asking you,” Michaela said, “to show up.”⁴

VI.

Whatever challenges we face as a congregation, however we answer the questions before us, however we experience anew “the old feeling” of faith and fellowship and music and mission, we will face, answer, and experience in a richer way if those of us who are *able* will re-commit to “to show up.”

Among the familiar phrases we have recited today are:

- *Born* of the virgin Mary
- *Suffered* under Pontius Pilate
- *Crucified, dead and buried*
- *Raised* again from the dead.

These phrases of our faith bear witness that we worship a God who became *flesh*, became a *body*, and *dwelt among us, in person, full of grace and truth*.⁵ These phrases do not speak of souls disconnected from bodies, of spirits too ethereal and holy to inhabit our bodies of flesh and blood, muscle and mind, adolescent awkwardness and old age aches and pains. We even dare to believe in “the resurrection of the *body*.”⁶

We are an *embodied* religion:

- We sing with our *voices*.
- We pray with our *lips*.
- We listen with our *ears*.
- We bow our *heads*.
- We close our *eyes*.
- We cry with our *tears*.
- We *taste* and *see* that the Lord is God.
- We *show up*, in person, for *God*, for *one another*.

When we do, we will – like Nick Adams – come much closer to recovering “that old feeling.”

*I was glad when they said to me,
‘Let us [show up in] the house of the Lord!’*

Amen.

⁴ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZlqDHhrydY>.

⁵ John 1:14.

⁶ The Apostles’ Creed.