



SUNDAY SERMON

## On the Way with a Promise

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“Praised as America’s greatest work of visionary art” is how the Smithsonian American Art Museum introduces James Hampton’s multi-media sculpture, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly*. Occupying an entire gallery, *The Throne* is a wondrous glimpse of a heavenly temple, prompted by Hampton’s vision of Christ’s return to earth.

After receiving the Bronze Star in 1945 for honorable service in a segregated unit of the Air Force, James Hampton left home in South Carolina to work as a janitor for the Federal Government until his death at age fifty-five. Working alone in a garage for fourteen years, giving form to his vision, Hampton transformed the drab interior into a resplendent world, unseen by any others in his lifetime. By day he swept floors and cleaned toilets. By night, he walked with God and the vision vouchsafed to him.

With tinfoil from a thousand pieces of chewing gum, found objects, and the fragments discarded by a bored public passing through the buildings in his custodial care, *The Throne* embodies a complex fusion of Christianity and African-American spiritual practices overlaying themes of deliverance and freedom; it is both astonishingly splendid and profoundly humble. Hampton described his work as a monument to Jesus in Washington D.C.

I don’t imagine there’s ever been a July 4<sup>th</sup> when the people of this nation felt that our ideals for independence were fully realized and a sense of equanimity was shared from purple mountain majesty and sea to shining sea. But neither do I recall a July 4<sup>th</sup> when the unfinished nature of this American project felt more pronounced. We have a long way to go.

I am not talking just about race. There are a lot of ways in which it feels we have a long way to go. Of course, any person, people, or nation, at any hour in any century, is somewhere on the road, on the way. It is always true that we’re no longer in the place where we first began, and not yet arrived at the place where we are heading. But there are a lot of days these days when it feels like it sure would be nice if we could either go back, or hurry up and get to wherever it is we’re getting because this in-between is, well, it feels hard.

So, I’d like to talk about that, about how it is to live right now – with a nation in turmoil, and a virus affecting every aspect of our lives. We cannot fix it; neither can we return nor magically race to the end. Yet, hard as it is, we live with a promise, and with promise comes hope.

*continued*

DATE  
Pentecost 5  
Sunday, July 5, 2020

PREACHER  
The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

Hebrews 11:8-16

St. Columba's  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The vision of a promised land animates our lives on many levels.

As people of God, it is the source of our Biblical narrative. It begins in Genesis when, "God said to Abraham, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." So, also in today's text: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." As Americans, it is our national narrative, "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union" – have launched this improbable experiment in democracy. And in our personal spiritual narratives; said Augustine: "Because you have made us for yourself, O God, our heart is restless, until it finds its rest in you."

Living "on-the-way" toward this Promised Land, let me offer a few perspectives or practices that are helping me.

First. We're not alone. It is true that we each have to face ourselves in the morning and we each have our own burdens. But the people of every generation experienced hardship, most have experienced far greater hardship than we. The Letter to the Hebrews makes this very point. Abraham... "was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out not knowing where he was going." He and Sarah "stayed for a time... in a foreign land, living in tents." The Letter speaks of many others – women and men, both illustrious and not so much – who together "died in faith without having (yet) received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them;" they acknowledged "that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth." We're not alone.

Two. We cannot do things the same way. We've all realized this – that our ways of functioning effectively do not work in this season. I take comfort in planning and then acting on that plan; it comes naturally to me to define a desired outcome and then look for the steps to get there. That kind of strategic application of levers isn't working so well. The terrain keeps shifting; our energy and focus keep shifting. One example: with our Nursery School, a couple of months ago, city officials determined that to provide for the safety of our children in the fall, we would need to limit the number of people in any given classroom. Much planning and many conversations later, we rearranged for other rooms to be used and accommodate every child. Success! But, as of last week, it now appears there won't be new regulations after all; the original plan is back on – which is good news; we just had our little exercise in futility.

Therefore, three. Be open to the Spirit and learn new things. Instead of dwelling on what we can no longer do, wonder what new things are now possible or called for. Instead of trying to make long term plans, how can I pay attention to what today has to offer?

For me, this is a question of posture and energy. Instead of trying to strive, act, achieve, how might I pay attention, receive, surrender, yield? I wonder, when the pandemic is over – whatever that means – will the same things be important for us as a congregation? Will we feel called to gather, worship, serve in much the same ways or will some new priority or calling have emerged? I don't know. But I am eager to pay attention. By pay attention, I mean that I will pray, with a posture of curiosity and wonder; I will listen and watch so that if something new emerges, we might say "here it is; here is our next step."

I think of Moses and the people of the Exodus wandering around in the wilderness for forty years, heading first in one direction and then back the other way. And I think if God just wanted to get them from point A to point B, God probably could have shown them a more direct route.

So I am thinking God wanted them to discover something on the way. The gift of that season was that, stripped of their former ways, over time, the people arrived at a deep and abiding trust in God. It is in times of dis-orientation and loss that the winds of the Spirit may blow and new life may present itself. I wonder how this might be a time for us to open ourselves to that possibility. Which brings me to my next point:

God is with us; it's going to be okay; I don't know how it's going to work out, or how long it will take, or how we will be changed along the way. But there's only so much any one of us can do, and acknowledging our limitations brings a kind of acceptance and peace. God is with us; it's going to be okay.

So to the last points: Give thanks, and help someone else. Each day. A daily practice. Find a way to pause at least twice during the day to consider, for what or for whom am I grateful – for the walk I took, the kindness someone showed me, the nation's awakening to new possibilities. And help someone else. We can all help someone. Practices of gratitude and compassion literally open and expand the capacity of our hearts. The more we give thanks, the more thankful we are. The more compassion we exercise, the more compassionate we become.

So these five: We're not alone. We cannot do things the same way. Be open to the Spirit, wonder, and receive something new. God is with us. Give thanks, and help someone else.

I wonder how it was for Mr. James Hampton. Was the vision he received of The Throne of Heaven complete in his mind's eye right from the start and he spent those years working to complete what he saw? Or was the vision a mere glimmer, a desire, an impulse, and each day presented him with some unexpected discovery; the offer of a glittering gift that would take him one step closer to the Promised Land?

As our Letter enjoins us: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

Come, beloved: with grace, gratitude, humility, and joy, let us run. Amen.