

Isaiah 2:1-5

Pathways

November 27, 2022

It is really good to be back after a long time away. I trust that you had a meaningful time with Dwight Davidson and Jeni Pedzinski, and that the Lord filled your time of worship and fellowship, as the season of Thanksgiving came, and now gives way to Advent, and as Christmas approaches.

My journey was unique, as I made my way out to Colorado to attend a conference of the Society of Biblical Literature (which I wasn't able to attend because of a positive Covid test, I wasn't sick, just positive), and where I was able to stay with my oldest son and his wife for a few days (they had Covid too). On my birthday we watched the USMNT play in the first round of the World Cup against Wales (it was a draw).

I have come to appreciate more and more the significance of the place of my recent journey, which is also where I have lived most of my life. It is what I call the Great Basin although no one else calls it that, the land where all the water ends up in the Mississippi River, and eventually in the Gulf of Mexico.

Let me share some descriptions of it from one of its 19th century admirers, Mark Twain, as much a son of the river as there ever was. From *Life on the Mississippi*:

“The Mississippi River . . . is not a commonplace river, but on the contrary is in all ways remarkable. Considering the Missouri its main branch, it is the longest river in the world, 4,300 miles (why not add the Ohio?). It seems safe to say that it is also the crookedest river in the world, since in one part of its journey, it uses up 1,300 miles to cover the same ground that a crow would fly over in 675.

It discharges three times as much water than the St. Lawrence (that is, the Great Lakes), 25 times as much as the Rhine, 338 times as much as the Thames. No other river has so vast a drainage basin. It drains its water supply from 28 states and territories, from Delaware on the Atlantic seaboard, and from all the country between *that* and Idaho on the Pacific slope (I tried to count and came up short. I think he is wrong about Delaware; Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia are the most easterly, but it does go into Canada).

The area of its drainage is as great as the combined areas of England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Austria, Italy, and Turkey; and almost all this wide region is fertile; the Mississippi Valley, proper, is exceptionally so.”

These excerpts that I have bored you with is from a book entitled, “*Life on the Mississippi*.” As a preface to that book there is a statement from *Harpers Magazine* in 1863 that includes the following and reinforces my point:

“the valley is 1,250,000 square miles. In length there are longer rivers . . . but in the capacity to support human life, none other is close. . . As a dwelling place for . . . humanity, it is by far the first upon the globe.”

My pathway led me from almost the eastern edge of it to the western, that is, from one end of it to the other, we are in it now as the waters of the Olentangy flow to its confines, on their way to the Gulf of Mexico.

I guess it is natural to be proud of one’s homeland, but even if old Samuel Clemens overstated the case a little, he was generally correct. It is not so much that the Mississippi River drainage basin is better than others, or even more beautiful (although I found the great plains in late fall very beautiful), but it is the largest inhabitable and most well-resourced river system in the world, and it meets the material needs of not only our country, but many others as well.

When the prophet Isaiah preached his message 26 or 27 hundred years ago, there is no reason to believe he even knew or suspected a place like where we now live existed; nor imagined a world population of 8 billion people (the population counter clicked past that number while I was away) that would require food and energy resources that would beggar his imagination.

All he knew was that his relatively small hill country nation which is in a part of the world now called, “the southern Levant,” (which means the southeastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea) was in trouble. They too were proud of where they came, and my guess is

their pathways, many of them, had taken them over every nook and cranny of it. And it was threatened, but not in a way that the riches of the Mississippi basin could help them with.

What he saw was a different kind of trouble, one that threatens even those who live in a land such as ours, with the most resources, the kind that can meet material needs, because it is about a different side of the human experience, the side we call spiritual, that involves relationships, and for some reason, people can mess those up even when there is plenty of everything to go around.

The prophet saw its doom and knew it would be dishonest to proclaim its survival and renewal when clearly its destruction was at hand. It is hard to imagine more discouraging circumstances. And it forced the people of Israel and all the prophets to re-think the meaning of their lives and of their faith. What he came up with was a challenge for his people, as it is for all people, and it should also be a challenge for us.

What he saw was the larger problem called the human condition, the human situation; given so much, yet responsible; able to consider the question of meaning, but not able to create and sustain it. And then in the midst of his country’s pain, he saw this vision:

“In the last days,” he wrote, “the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, and *all the*

*nations will stream to it. Many peoples will say, 'Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord . . . he will teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths . . . he will judge between the nations . . .'*

And then, with a new vision of what geography means, or a different kind of geography altogether, the prophet saw a different kind of pathway, one that did not focus on mountains or rivers, or great plains filled with rich natural resources, one that encompasses the whole of humanity in a grand relationship with God, and with each other, and a vision of peace that in view of the history of humanity, including the present situation, seems hard to believe.

“They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, let us walk in the Lord’s light,” the pathway that the Lord’s light illumines. One gets the impression that this is not a physical pathway (such as I-70), but a way of living and understanding life.

The path that the Lord’s light illumines is one of health and wholeness, justice and peace and mercy. It acknowledges the set of needs that corn and beans cannot fill; the need to be accepted as one is, forgiven, loved. It is a pathway of hope. It is to that hope that we look on this first Sunday of the Advent season, because the birth of the child is the beginning of the promises kept.