

Who Strive
A Sermon by David Goff
Psalm 46:1-11; Hebrews 2:10-18
June 27, 2010

You could say that this moment in my life represents one of return. After a year spent away at school—my final year spent at school—I am again in the city of my childhood, residing in the house of my childhood, and I stand here where I stood one summer ago, talking to many of the people I talked to one summer ago. And what seems an appropriate question to ask is: so, what is the distance, between this return and those experiences I had the last time I was here? And what seems an appropriate answer, according to conventional wisdom, is: well, Time. Time is the distance. A year has come and gone, and here we are again. We will measure the Time by upheavals; by the changes that occurred between that event and this one. And if we standardize our observation of change, using second-hand ticks or planetary revolutions, we can quantify the separateness of that event and this one, and say: alright, *one year*, or *eleven months*, or whatever it has been. But while Time certainly measures a certain separateness of events, I think most of us would attest that it does not always measure the separateness of experiences. On the first day of spring we might feel closer to last spring than we did during the intervening autumn. The sun, the scent, the similar activities bring us closer, at the same time that we are further removed. An anniversary day might make us feel nearer to whatever it commemorates than the previous day made us feel, even though the previous day was

chronologically closer. Remembrance can often bridge the distance that we attribute to Time; and sometimes it takes effort to remember.

But (now with this book in mind) how can we hope to remember what we have never known? Born into this world, we discover the option to affirm, as the fathers of our tradition, an ancient line of upright men. Of many of them we know little more than a name and the span of his years. Of a couple, maybe some of his deeds; maybe that he walked with God. Born into this world, we discover that there was one who came before us, called Counselor; one not unlike us, only more patient, more perceiving, more forgiving. And though he left no writings of his own, by the grace of God some others made note of his works and teachings, that we in this later time might better contemplate what is meant by this life. With the coming of each new year, the calendar system that we use celebrates that man, and recalls the origins of this era *anno domini* in which we conceive ourselves. And yet, at the same time, each new year reminds us of the growing rift between his present and our own; each year the number grows, and more and more events intervene between us and the events of his days. And this to the extent that many may well wonder: well, so what is *our* book? What is *our* people? What is the home to which we must return? And is the Good News still good when it is this old?

But again—what exactly is the distance? Whether over hours or over years things are always changing. The cells of our bodies are constantly displaced by new ones, our minds are psychologically recalibrated in

response to exciting or traumatic events, old memories are reconfigured to support new interpretations. The objects with which we interact are broken and refashioned and ultimately replaced. Buildings rise and are demolished. The temperature drops. The day lengthens. The world turns. Every snowflake is unique. Any one of us could talk for days about all the changes we regularly encounter and undergo, and yet, every night that we roll up to our front steps, we feel that we are home.

Over time and across populations, people have built their home in this world using what tools they have had available to them. They speak many languages, preach many dogmas, justify many deeds with their diverse logics, arguments, and observations. Differing words direct our attention to different aspects of the world. Differing scientific and political theories inform our actions and shape our priorities. And we often like very much to build our conceptions of identity around the particular things to which we pay attention, the particular ways in which we act, and the particular values we prioritize. But all that mental framework is only like the slender film resting atop the deep volume of broth that mutually infuses us. We share deeply the *experience* of this life that grips us and binds us to one another; a great store of things felt, things intimated, things known and not known, things noticed and not comprehended.

We hear often about progress—progress of industry, of medicine, of scientific thought, of political and human rights causes, of civilization however we might conceive of it. Schoolchildren peruse the past and trace

the events that shaped later circumstances, traveling from ancient times down the line to the present day, and checking off the important discoveries that have contributed to our fuller knowledge of the world. As far as I can tell, many things do seem to be better now than before—especially important to me, for instance, is dental care; some other things seem to be worse—like garbage accumulation and resource exhaustion; and most things seem, at the very least, to be *changed*—such as the prevailing conceptions of what exactly we are, by what mechanisms we came to people this earth, and, now that we are here, how properly to amuse ourselves. But whatever progresses we may have or may seem to have undergone, there is one progress that I think is, and has been for as long as we can tell, real and vital. And that is the progress of each one, of each human along the pass that each alone must brave, in order to find his or her rock, to find his or her compass, to find the way to the home that none is denied. For although each walks or rides or rolls alone, yet a common good travels beside us, and those who incline to meet it draw close, in ways not always comprehensible, to those others who have traveled in like manner before us.

For a moment, let us diverge on an imaginary journey. We visit the gravesite of William Shakespeare. We visit the hallowed ground of Gettysburg. We acquire an original Rembrandt. We acquire Alexander's sword hilt. We hold in our hand the keepsake of an old lost relative. For a moment you may find yourself transported, maybe transformed by these. And this, despite that such relics offer little more than—and sometimes at

most—the oils of those people’s skin, a scent, maybe a mental image of the object and that person together. But imagine, then, that we incline toward the things that truly built up the life of those people, the things that did not become relics, but that are renewed, with a fire and a clarity, in each human who seeks them, things that we may hold deep in our own being and not just under our fingers. And I speak here of those elements that build up our experience and our approach to that experience, the enthusiasm, the persistence, the challenges undergone, the imperfections seeking out betterment, and other of those many elements, some of them less easy to name. Incline toward what gave life to those who have lived, and we live with their blessing upon us.

Yet how do we, or anyone, know that we ever incline toward the same common good as anyone else? that we stake our perseverance in the same sturdy ground? How do we know whether the inspiration that we encounter in our separate lives can be legitimized by similar experiences in other lives? Whether the good to which we look does, in fact, exist, a priori, outside of the limited perspective of the creature who each of us is? Well, there is lots that we do not quite know. But however we conceive of that good in which we trust, the trust itself is self-legitimizing. As Martin Luther writes, “These two things belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God...To have God, you see, does not mean to lay hands upon him, or put him in a purse, or shut him up in a chest. We lay hold of him when our heart embraces him and clings to him.

To cling to him with all our heart is nothing else than to entrust ourselves to him completely.”

It is through trusting that we come to know God, and it is through trusting that we may meet the things of this world without a fear that overpowers us. And those who travel with humble assurance, who trust that although we are daunted, yet we are not defeated; that although we have pain, yet we are not defeated; that although we pass away, and leave relics, yet we are not defeated—they tap their strength from the same reservoir. Inasmuch as we unite when we break bread together—from the remembrance that we all have hunger, and from the knowledge of the taste on our tongues, and the estimate that that taste lies similarly on other tongues, and the bodies are similarly energized from the same loaf—so too do those draw close who partake of the good things of this life, who are nourished and fortified by a similar approach to experience. We sit here in this church and confront our ancestors, on the opposite side of this text; and it is no mirror image we see. But it is a common narrative that unfolds. We sit here as living proof that they need not have felt alone in their struggles. And they remain as written testimony that we need not travel this life without hope of legitimacy.

There is a well-known saying, that misery loves company. And as far as I know it is often true. But the miserable are not the only ones whose company we keep. We keep a varied company, and one ever shifting, for we have within each of us the capacity to feel a great many ways. And we have

within each of us the desire to know that our feelings are legitimate. If we choose irritation, we will find in this world no shortage of things to irritate us. If we choose resentment, or suspicion, or despondency, we will find no shortage of things to resent, or suspect, or render us despondent. But if we seek a different approach, an approach that does not resist, but rather embraces those things that we do not understand, one that assures us that we may accomplish what we may accomplish, and that those humble works are indeed valuable—if we seek it, it will stand always to receive us. That is certainly not to say that it is easy. But even when we feel estranged, and do not know where to look in our own lives, we have those who came before us, who sought the best paths to learn what we too may know, and who lived in such a way as to strengthen us.

What is the distance, between ourselves and those older ones to whom we look for example? The distance is those things we still have yet to achieve, to endure, to maintain, before we offer up a complete life. The distance is that we still have things to do, and rites of passage to know, before we are complete. But the closeness is that, as we do those things, we may strive with a familiar companion. For us, who strive in this world, confronting changing forms and changing circumstances—at times warm and welcoming, at times harsh and abrasive: we look always to that deeper core that, although all about it burn, yet is not consumed.