

**“THE TREASURE CHEST OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY: 3) “COMING HOME”**

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**February 6-7, 2010**

Call to Gather from Forrest Church

When our soul is at home in the universe, the universe makes its home in our soul.  
In the strangest way, God and we are roommates.<sup>1</sup>

Reading “Ithaca” by C.P. Cavafy

When you set out on your journey to Ithaca,  
pray that the road is long,  
full of adventure, full of knowledge.  
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclops,  
the angry Poseidon -- do not fear them:  
You will never find such as these on your path,  
if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine  
emotion touches your spirit and your body.  
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclops,  
the fierce Poseidon you will never encounter,  
if you do not carry them within your soul,  
if your soul does not set them up before you.

Pray that the road is long.  
That the summer mornings are many, when,  
with such pleasure, with such joy  
you will enter ports seen for the first time;  
stop at Phoenician markets,  
and purchase fine merchandise,  
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
and sensual perfumes of all kinds,  
as many sensual perfumes as you can;  
visit many Egyptian cities,  
to learn and learn from scholars.

Always keep Ithaca in your mind.  
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.  
But do not hurry the voyage at all.

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<sup>1</sup> Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009—from an uncorrected page proof), p. 157.

It is better to let it last for many years;  
and to anchor at the island when you are old,  
rich with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.  
Without her you would have never set out on the road.  
She has nothing more to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.  
Wise as you have become, with so much experience,  
you must already have understood what Ithacas mean.<sup>2</sup>

### Sermon

I have a confession: with intentionality I just, well, jerked you around. First we had the reading from the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, written in 1911. That was a time of great optimism—just before World War One and the chain of human-created calamities that stained much of the rest of the twentieth century. Cavafy portrays the journey home as full of exciting and friendly adventure:

Do not fear the Lestrygonians  
and the Cyclopes and the angry Poseidon.  
You shall never meet such as these on your path  
if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine  
emotion touches your body and your spirit...  
if you do not carry them within your soul,  
if your soul does not raise them up before you.

So given this, Cavafy declares: pray for a long road! It's going to be beautiful and fun! And if you do meet such beasts as the Cyclopes—well, to play with the translation a bit, it's your own damn fault!

And then we sang “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”—a completely different sentiment about the journey home. The message of this song is that your journey is not going to be all sweetness and light. You *are* going to meet the Cyclopes, or the slave owner (surely a reality for the enslaved Africans who created this masterpiece) or some such beast. You are going to feel like a motherless child. And much of the time, you're going to feel like you're a long, long way from home.

So which is true? Is the journey heroic and beautiful, or is it tortuous and plodding and full of moments of utter despair? The mythologist Wendy Doniger writes: “To the question, ‘Which is the reality?’ the myth replies, ‘Yes.’”<sup>3</sup> This is exactly how mythology answers this question: “Which is true? Cavafy’s brave and wondrous journey, or the African American spiritual’s motherless child image?” Yes. Both sentiments about the journey home are true. I

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<sup>2</sup> In Robert Fulghum, *Words I Wish I Wrote* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 49-50.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 18.

put these completely different sentiments back-to-back in our service to stake out this both/and territory.

So let's look at a few mythic descriptions of the journey home. We'll start with the Western granddaddy of all journeys home—the *Odyssey*—and slowly make our way from the Greeks up to the 2008 Iraq War movie *Stop-Loss*.

As we ponder the *Odyssey*, I would once again lift up a brilliant adaptation by Mary Zimmerman. She masterfully captures the essence of the original and lets its voice speak to us in the twenty-first century. Instead of the 500 small-print pages of Robert Fitzgerald's landmark translation, you can get a lot out of reading Zimmerman's 165-page larger print adaptation (which is available in our bookstore).

Zimmerman begins her adaptation the same way that Homer did,<sup>4</sup> but in this case the actor reads the opening lines from a book in a very uninspired fashion:

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story  
of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
the wanderer, harried for years on end,  
after he plundered the stronghold  
on the proud height of Troy...

If you had a really boring ninth grade teacher, think of that—and you have the spirit. It's just a bunch of dead words. But then in Zimmerman's adaptation, a Muse, one of the goddesses who inspires creativity, interrupts the actor, snatching the book and throwing it away. The Muse grabs the actor from behind and begins whispering in her ear. The actor, gasping and clutching at her heart, begins to speak in a rush, the words flowing out of her. The words of Homer have become the actor's own. This is the magic of Zimmerman's adaptation: she makes the words of the ancient Greeks her own. She makes them speak to us with new life.

Well, let's review the broad outlines of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, ruler of the island of Ithaca, was an important member of the Greek assault on Troy. He's the guy who came up with the clever idea of sneaking Greek fighters into Troy by offering the Trojans a great wooden horse. Through all of the drama swirling around the war, Odysseus was a decidedly mixed character: crafty, resourceful and courageous, he was also conniving, duplicitous, arrogant, petty, and merciless.<sup>5</sup>

It turns out that the nine-year battle for Troy was the easy part for Odysseus. Returning home to Ithaca and his beloved wife Penelope and son Telemachus turns out to be the real trial. Odysseus has angered a few too many gods—a mistake he quickly compounds when he and his men pay a visit to a port shortly after departing Troy and slaughter just about everyone in the town—men, women, children. As a result, roaring tempests on the sea alternating with windless days when he could get nowhere block his way home. He has to face down the Lotus Eaters, the Laestrygonians, the bewitching Sirens, monsters and whirlpools. When the one-eyed Cyclops Polyphemus traps his men and starts eating them one by one, Odysseus devises a clever scheme. The rescue involves blinding Polyphemus' only eye. True to his character, Odysseus cannot resist taunting Polyphemus as he takes his leave after blinding the monster. Odysseus makes the mistake of revealing his name, thus making it very easy for an enraged Polyphemus to know exactly who Poseidon should hex. Next Odysseus confronts Circe—the nymph who turns some

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Zimmerman, *The Odyssey* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), pp. 3-5.

<sup>5</sup> Partly from Robert Fitzgerald, translator, *The Odyssey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 50-51.

of the few remaining men he had with him into swine. Oh yes, and then there's a trip to the Underworld and an eight year detour during which the sea nymph Calypso tries to make Odysseus her immortal husband. By this point, Odysseus has lost all of the men and ships he started with. He's trapped.

Finally, the goddess Athena convinces Zeus to intervene, and Odysseus is allowed to return home. Calypso tells Odysseus, "Your unhappiness/has just ended. You're going home." When at last he lands on Ithaca, he kneels down and kisses the ground. "I had not thought to see you ever again," he says. He reveals his identity to his son and, eventually, to Penelope. Once Penelope understands it really is her long-lost Odysseus, she says "Odysseus, it's you. It's you." (Shades of *Avatar* and the scene I talked about last week when Neytiri says to Jake, "I see you.") Odysseus' trial is not quite over, however, for a group of loutish suitors have virtually taken up residence in Penelope's house. She has steadfastly denied their entreaties, but is at the end of her rope. Odysseus, with the help of Athena and Telemachus, kills all of the suitors.<sup>6</sup>

So what does Odysseus' beloved Ithaca stand for in his harrowing quest for home? It stands for many things. It symbolizes his unconditional love for Penelope (which he has maintained in spite of his forced or unforced dalliances on his journey home). It stands for rootedness in his family—not only Penelope, but their son, his parents, even his loyal servants who help him dispense with the suitors. Ithaca also stands for the island itself—the place he grew up, the place he knew so well, the place that has been holy ground to his family for so many generations. Joseph Campbell points out that Ithaca also symbolizes a balanced life—a life that has both female and male inflections to it. His slaughter at the port city early in his journey home showed that he was not ready to make room for the female principle that had been so long absent during his years battling the Trojans.<sup>7</sup> Ithaca also stands for self-knowledge and personal growth: Odysseus learns a lot and grows immensely through all of the travails of his long journey home. And finally, Ithaca also means atonement—atonement for the shadow side of his personality.

Looking back on his journey after he had returned, killed the suitors, worked through his re-entry with Penelope, and maybe taken a few days off enjoying coffee and the newspaper in his jammies, I have a hunch that Cavafy's poem would have resonated with him. It was an amazing journey. He did meet the Cyclopes and the angry Poseidon. Unfortunately, he did carry them within his troubled soul. (And I might ask: Who doesn't? We all metaphorically-speaking do have demons in us—it's part of the human condition.) So Odysseus, like all of us, has to work through his inner demons. But as he does so, he learns a lot. He grows a lot. I think he would have had some sense that Ithaca gave him the gift of his journey and its wisdom.

But at the same time, there were plenty of times in his harrowing journey that Odysseus must have felt like a motherless child. His trip to the Underworld underscores this—he sees his mother who has died of grief at his apparent demise. When he tries to embrace her, she sifts through his arms like flour through a sifter. There's nothing there; she is "impalpable/as shadows are...., wavering like a dream."<sup>8</sup> No doubt this was an incredibly painful moment in a journey chock full of agonizing moments. I have a hunch that if he could have chosen between having the long albeit enlightening journey home on the one hand, and going directly home to Ithaca from Troy (do not pass "GO") on the other hand, Odysseus would have opted for the

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<sup>6</sup> For this plot synopsis, I use Fitzgerald, Zimmerman, and Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Penguin, 1972), pp. 227-229.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2004), pp. 131, 227-229, 230.

<sup>8</sup> Zimmerman, pp. 85-87.

quick trip home in a heartbeat. I think that's usually the case with the agonizing experiences that help us grow. Yes, it's great we grew from them, but we would probably happily give up the growth if it means we could give up the agony, too.

Odysseus's journey is not the only journey home described in Greek mythology. There's also, for example, the story of Philoktetes which I talked about in the first sermon of the series. In that story, Philoktetes is cast away on a deserted island by Odysseus and others. After eight hellish years struggling to survive the harsh conditions as well as the crushing loneliness, Philoktetes is invited to rejoin the Greek army and the war against Troy. It is interesting to note that as much as he hated the island upon which he was cast away, he has feelings for it, too. Before leaving the island behind, he says, "But let us first kiss the earth/Reverently in my homeless home of a cave" and he bend down and kisses the ground.<sup>9</sup>

Many authors of stories, novels, plays and screenplays have carried on with the theme of coming home:

- In the movie *Cast Away*, Chuck Noland is a workaholic FedEx executive. A FedEx plane he's flying on crashes into the Pacific Ocean in the middle of nowhere. The only survivor of the crash, he washes ashore on a deserted island. Like Philoktetes, Chuck must struggle every day for survival, and he also must cope with his overwhelming loneliness. His journey home turns out to be long and tortuous. One thing keeps him going: the memory of his beloved significant other Kelly, and a picture he has of her in a family heirloom watch she gave him. He also creates a companion out of a Wilson volleyball that washes ashore from the crash. He paints a face on the volleyball and names him Wilson. He's stuck on the island for more than four years. Finally, he sees a possible way out when part of a porta pottie washes ashore. He realizes he can use it for a sail. So he builds a makeshift raft out of wood and attaches the porta pottie to it. With the sail, he is able to get through the huge waves constantly pounding onto the island from all directions. While he doesn't kiss the island when he leaves, he does gaze at it with the same kind of bittersweet feeling that Philoktetes had when he left his island refuge behind. After a long and harrowing journey on the raft, Chuck finally is rescued by a passing cargo ship. He returns to Kelly only to find that she had to move on with her life. Presuming he was long dead, she is now married to a different man, and they have a daughter. Chuck goes to her house to give the watch back to her and to thank her for helping keep him alive on that island. In the pouring rain, as he's about to leave, they embrace at the end of Kelly's driveway and profess their undying love for each other. But they both know that Kelly can't walk away from her new life. Chuck tells her, "You have to go home." She walks into her house—that's her journey home—and he drives away into his uncertain future. In this variant of the mythic journey home, it turns out that Chuck really couldn't go home again. Home had changed—for Kelly and for him.
- In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy's journey is a journey home—ostensibly to Kansas, but symbolically, to her true self. Instead of the Cyclopes and other monsters, Dorothy has to battle with the wicked witch of the West and flying monkeys and lions and tigers and bears (or at least her fear of them). Dorothy is transformed by her journey. She returns home a changed person, more spiritually mature. She has symbolically moved from her

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<sup>9</sup> David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., *Greek Tragedies Volume 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 67.

childhood to her adulthood, and in the process, found who she truly is and what's most important in life.

- In *Cold Mountain*, a wounded Confederate soldier has had enough of war and embarks on the long journey home to his beloved North Carolina mountains. Like Odysseus, his way home is blocked by all sorts of hideous dangers and temptations. And his reunion with his beloved does not last much longer than Chuck's and Kelly's at the end of Kelly's driveway in *Cast Away*.
- In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—a clever comedic take on the *Odyssey* by the Coen Brothers—Ulysses Everett McGill and two fellow prisoners escape from a chain gang and face down lots of demons and obstacles on their long journey home—including a Cyclops-like Bible salesman brilliantly played by John Goodman.
- In the 2008 movie *Stop-Loss*, an Iraq War vet returns home from the war psychologically scarred and suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. He receives orders to return to Iraq but decides he cannot go. He deserts the army, and eventually after a painful journey, decides to report for duty.
- And, of course, there's *Abiyoyo*, the wonderful story that Terry Dawson blesses us with each year.<sup>10</sup> In this story, a ukulele-playing boy and his annoying dad are ostracized: they are made to move from their home in the town to outside the town. There is then a physical journey back into the town, and an interior journey back into the now enlarged hearts of their fellow townspeople.

This is only a handful of journeys home. Arguably, this is Hollywood's favorite theme, echoing through from *IKT's a Wonderful Life* to *Star Wars* to *Apollo 13* to *The Lord of the Rings*. The Muse spoke to each of the creators of these different stories, whispering in their ears so they could unearth the truths of the mythical journey home within themselves. Each retelling adds something new to the story's wisdom. The story's appeal lies in its universality—though each of our journeys home is unique, we are, all of us, on some sort of a journey home. Like Chuck Noland in *Cast Away*, like Odysseus, like Dorothy even, our journey home won't likely lead us to a place identical to the one we left long ago. When we arrive home, it is inevitably different, and we are inevitably different because of the journey. T.S. Eliot captures this truth well in "The Four Quartets":

We shall not cease from exploration  
and the end of all of our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.<sup>11</sup>

Last week, I talked about how mythology—especially Greek mythology—suggests that the search for self includes both an exterior, physical dimension and an inner dimension. This is true of the journey home, too. The journey home is both the interior journey to our true self (whatever that might be) and a physical journey that takes place someplace on this planet (or, if we're lucky enough to be an astronaut, beyond). Take Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*: the story is a metaphor of her journey into adulthood, but it also has a lot to do with a real place—not Oz, but Kansas. Kansas pulsates through the whole journey. Dorothy not only discovers who she

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<sup>10</sup> Terry told this story at our services this weekend as the Children's Story.

<sup>11</sup> Reading #685, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

really is with the help of Kansas, she *is* who she is partially because of Kansas. Place is important.

So while my inner journey is real, the physical places I've been—especially the places I've bonded with—are themselves critical to my journey. The sand dunes and beaches of West Michigan, the rugged coast of Maine, the paradisaical yet tragically war-torn beauty of Sri Lanka, the Oz-like University of Chicago rising in the midst of an urban wasteland, the comfortable Fox River Valley, the mystical North Woods, the mountains of Jasper and Rocky Mountain National Parks, the Grand Canyon, the primeval nightly glow of a volcano Hawaii: my journey—including my interior journey—is inextricably linked to these places.

This leads to a concluding thought: it seems to me that we humans need to take a collective leap in our understanding. We need to figure out that this planet/spinning through space<sup>12</sup>—is our home. Not just Kansas, not just the Fox River Valley, not just the United States, not just the Basque Country or China or Russia is our home, but this *whole planet* is our home.<sup>13</sup> Joseph Campbell writes, “On this spaceship Earth there is no ‘elsewhere’ anymore. And no mythology that continues to speak or teach of ‘elsewhere’ and ‘outsiders’ meets the requirement of this hour.”<sup>14</sup> If humanity is to survive, we have to figure this out. This is why Campbell points to the amazing new view of our planet that our journey into space has given us: the picture of our planet spinning in space.<sup>15</sup> It's clear from this vantage point the Earth is but a small, vulnerable, beautiful speck in the sprawling immensity of space. And we are in this together. We have to learn to inhabit this home together.<sup>16</sup>

To do so, we must create a new mythology that teaches us this fact of our inherent togetherness. You see, mythology is not just about learning what's on our inside; it's also about learning what's on our outside. Our journeys are internal and cosmic. Mythology can help us because it is both a microscope and a telescope.<sup>17</sup> It helps us see the minute and the cosmic. And the minute and the cosmic are interrelated: the beautiful reality is that the cosmos—our sprawling universe—is literally within us. We are made up of the same physical material as our planet and other matter in space. Forrest Church writes, “Another way to discover ourselves within the cosmos is to discern the cosmos within us.”<sup>18</sup>

The question, then, is: Will we be able to inhabit this home together? This is *the* crucial question of our age. Our survival depends on how we answer this question. It is my hope and prayer that we will answer this question with a resounding “YES!” If we do, I suspect a new mythology—built on the building blocks of the old—will have helped us arrive at this answer.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://quizilla.teenick.com/lyrics/7165610/this-pretty-planet>.

<sup>13</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was: Myths of Self-Imitation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 208: “There is no one home...; the planet is our home.”

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, p. 266.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker, *Saving Paradise* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), p. xxii.

<sup>17</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, pp. 7, 9, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Church, p. 160.