



To Go or Not to Go

Matt 10:25; Jer 9:23–24; Phil 1:3–11, 3:7–14

February has begun, a short month that always feels long. It is cold, damp and gray—gray, gray, gray, with glistening black on the naked trunks and branches of the trees. They look dead, but they have merely withdrawn their strength deep down into their roots. They have already put forth new buds. Imagine, if I were only like a tree, I could blame my lack of strength on new buds.

It has taken a long time to come to this point, to the point of writing about suffering. To be honest I know why, of course. It has to do not just with illness and all the demands of daily life that we place on ourselves and on each other, and with the little time and strength we have left over. It has to do with utter exhaustion.

A traditional hymn invites us as disciples of Jesus: “Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.”³ I sing along, but I am reluctant, too—do I even want to think about this matter of suffering one more time? Am I afraid of suffering? Yes, I clearly am, and it would be perverse of me not to fear it. I don’t want any more of it, thank you very much, at least not if I have a choice about it. I don’t want any more of it in my own life, nor in anyone else’s either. I am so weary of the whole thing. Just thinking and writing about suffering is like digging a well in hard ground; it is not some mere fluttering of wings. It creates a kind of defenselessness within me, against both unkindness and interruptions; I can feel it as soon as I begin.

On the other hand, I can easily imagine myself going up to Jerusalem among Jesus' disciples during his final weeks, perhaps as one of the women who followed him from Galilee. I am glad to do it. I love him just as they did, and his actions at the end of his life have a special sort of consistency that attracts me.

Yet this journey he makes, God's struggle against evil, ends in powerlessness. Of course, it doesn't actually *end* that way, but it does for all practical purposes, since its true end—his victory—is for now so colossally out there, “beyond” the here and now. His victory cannot come until after he endures the powerlessness of life and the victory of death.

It should be enough for a disciple if she endures what her Master endures. Naturally! The comfort in this duty is both the knowledge that every evil thing will one day be abolished, and the certainty that the Master is always near. But that comfort comes with no promise that powerlessness and lack of strength will loosen their grip on us during our time here on earth.

I am not saying that I like it this way! Luther's advice doesn't come easy for me, to fix my eyes on the devil and roar at him, to scream into the darkness at the eyes watching me there (if there really are eyes watching me at all): “Just remember, Satan! You are more transient than I am!”

“Certainty”—is that the right word for his nearness? Well, perhaps. “Perception” isn't right; it's too much a sense-based word, and rarely are the senses involved in an encounter with God, as in touching the hem of a garment or in feeling the caress of a wing. Yet his nearness is more than just saying, “I feel his presence”—something that happens far less often than *always*, in any case. It probably doesn't matter so much; truly enduring and resilient love, the sort one has for one's family, is not something that one always feels either. I can be as irritated as I like with those nearest to me or so utterly overcome with weariness that I feel nothing at all, yet I know that I love them just the same. And faith is most like that kind of love.

“Yes, but how does it feel” asked one of the students in my confirmation class. “What does it feel like to have real contact with God when you pray?”

“Well,” I tried to answer, “at its best, it’s brightness and warmth and closeness, like being screened off from everything else.”

“Ab,” he replied. “Like living inside the same light bulb with God.”

Maybe so. Almost everything that has to do with God has to be described in pictures, many pictures, even contradictory or paradoxical pictures. Having God nearby is also like riding the trolley when I was a schoolgirl in Gothenburg. A pole stood in the middle of the open platforms at either end of the trolley, and we had to hang on to it as the car swung and lurched. The God of all the ages is like that pole.

Or it’s like finally seeing my most dearly beloved again, like a closeness to which even my skin presents no barrier and in which to touch each other is to join together what was meant to be a unity. It is as when we look into each other’s eyes and rest in one another, as when we see and recognize and love each other, as when even my very skull seems transparent and time turns inside out, and wings dance in the mist above a waterfall.

I look at Sunday’s text from Jeremiah; he speaks grimly as usual. Well he might, for he was a man of much affliction. “Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth.”

Borrowing an expression of my grandchild, I reply, “Okay, prophet! I won’t boast, even though sometimes I feel as if I were a thousand years old and had seen everything there is to see and had tasted enough of life to be wise forever. Can’t I take some pride in having learned a little along the way? Shouldn’t I perhaps be able to

find a little more strength to ponder over?" (And I'm just talking about physical strength, in my muscles, rather than about some sort of inner quality.) As for riches, I'm not likely ever to become wealthy, and that's a relief of sorts, just as it is also a relief to have the means to buy new shoes when the old ones fall apart.

Jeremiah goes on: "But let those who boast, boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love."

Here now we definitely have something. When the Lord God resolves a matter, he does not do it through human wisdom or strength or riches—or through power, for that matter. He has only one method of operating: through love.

But what is that supposed to mean? What does it look like? How am I supposed to understand it? Still worse, Paul says in his letter to the Philippians that even my judgments about things—perhaps my entire intellect?—must follow in the path of love. "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best."

There is no doubt that I must go to Jerusalem. I read further in Philippians: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings."

