
His Most Sublime 'Trick'

Going Away to Come Back

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Ascension Day – Year C

In the name of God: “Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.” Amen.

—*The Hymnal*, 388, v.5

Dear people of faith, there’s a story that I can’t find in print although I know I read it years ago. It was told by an anthropologist who discovered a trick for endearing yourself to a community that you want to study. Some way or another you must find a reason—any reason—to leave a community soon after your arrival and then return after enough time has passed. Here’s why. Upon returning under such circumstances this particular anthropologist was amazed at the difference in everyone’s attitude. When you first arrive of course people treat you as the stranger that you are. At best you’re regarded as a dignitary who needs to be carefully managed and so kept at a distance from the kind of private activities that you want to study. But after enough absence, you will be greeted with great enthusiasm as a familiar person. People realize they missed the curious visitor and begin to look forward to a reunion. So remarkable was the difference that this anthropologist determined to make it part of professional strategy in doing future fieldwork.

Now in describing that dynamic I call it both a ‘trick’ and a ‘strategy:’ the trick and strategy of ‘going away’ precisely in order to ‘come back.’ But here’s a different, more common illustration of a related dynamic: going away with the promise of coming back. In order to foster that sense of confidence and promise in our young people, a children’s song was written by Fred Rogers, the creator of that classic children’s television program that many of us grew up watching called, “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood.” He titled the song, “Grownups Come Back.” That’s right, the song declares. Whenever they go away grownups also come back. They return. They don’t just stay gone. They are not abandoning the children for some reason of neglect, or out of indifference, or because of more sinister circumstances. No, “Grownups Come Back,” the song strategically proclaims. Indeed the website you may want to Google calls it a “[Strategy Song](#)” for “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood.” Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood is today’s television successor to “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood.” And here are the lyrics to the song as Fred Rogers wrote it. I hope you appreciate how it uses repetition and rhyme that can work well for children.

Even when [they] go away
Grown-ups come back.

Will [they] pick me up when I go to school?
Yep, at the end of the day [‘cause] that’s the rule.

Grown-ups come back—

Grown-ups come back to you.
Grown-ups come back they do,
Grown-ups come back.

Will [they] come back from work at the end of the day?
Yep, [they'll] come back home and then we can play.

What about when mom and dad go out on a date?
They'll kiss you goodnight and ... be there when you wake.

What about when mom drops me off at school?
At the end of day she'll come pick you up too.

Grown-ups come back—

Grown-ups come back to you.

Grown-ups come back they do.

Grown-ups come back. www.neighborhoodarchive.com/dtn/songs/grownups_come_back.html.

So that's the song's lyrics. And by the way, you can find a charming video of that song on YouTube; just Google YouTube and "Grownups Come Back." www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVcFOUYIvWs

But now I need to say more about the words 'trick' on the one hand, and 'strategy' on the other. In a few minutes I'll relate those words to our readings appointed for today's observance of Ascension Day. But first I need to acknowledge that the word 'trick' seems less appropriate to describe that children's song. Of course there's a problem with tricking children into having confidence in adults. It's a problem that we do well to acknowledge on this day as we also observe Mother's Day. Here's a mom who is concerned that the song is 'tricking' children into believing something that may not be true—and too often is not true. Here's how she talks about it.

Daniel Tiger ... [she writes in her internet blog] is the cute little brown-and-orange striped tiger that took over for the late Fred Rogers on the hit PBS show Mr. Roger's Neighborhood.

Now it's called Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood and overall I really like the show. My four-year-old has watched it a few times and he likes it too.

But recently I really didn't agree with one of the episodes.

At the beginning of the show, Daniel's parents were heading out on a date for the night and he was nervous to be at home with a babysitter. So, the tiger couple ... sang a catchy little tune with the lyrics: "Grownups come back." And sure enough at the end of their date, when Daniel was in bed almost asleep, his parents came back and tucked him in.

Then later in the episode ... Daniel was nervous about being dropped off at school and wanted to stay with his dad. His dad broke into song, reminding his son that, "Grownups come back."

I couldn't help thinking, what if a grownup doesn't come back?

... Maybe I'm a pessimist ... [and] I'm not saying that it happens very often, but what if ... there is a car accident or medical emergency that makes it so that a grownup can't come back. Or worse, what if ... a grownup simply *chooses* not to come back?

... Maybe I'm reading too much into it. Maybe it's cute that Daniel's parents crafted a little jingle to help their son deal with a stressful situation.

But I still don't think I'll use the "grownups come back" phrase with my own children. I think it's an exaggerated blanket statement that could occasionally lead to more stress or heartache.

<https://boogersonthewall.com/2012/12/06/grown-ups-come-back/>

So that's the dissenting response from a real live mom on this Mother's Day. Indeed her blog, subtitled "Adventures in Momhood," has a number of responses from other moms. Here's the most critical one:

I just came across your blog, this song is actually currently playing, I want to turn it off, but my son loves this show. I hate this song so much. I did not have my father growing up after the age of 6, he was in prison until I was 18. Before that he was in the army, so I didn't see him anyways. Also growing up in a military lifestyle ... I saw so many children who's mom/dad did NOT come back. When I was 19, I babysat a little boy who lost his father, who just took off and wanted nothing to do with them. He was so scared to then lose his mom, and she could not find a way to break that anxiety, I dunno if it helped in the long run, but while I watched him. I would tell him a vague "You'll never be alone" and "Your mommy and everyone else love you" he would calm down for a little bit, and I would have to repeat until his mom came to pick him up. My son luckily has both my husband and I here, and we will always do our best to return to him. [But] I find this song is very poor taste. I'm glad to see, my husband I are not the only ones with issues [about] this ridiculous song. [awkwardkyarii Apr 21, 2014 @ 09:27:22](#)

Well, that comment is so dismissive that it reminds me of the kind of negative comments about our Christian faith that we get from our atheist brothers and sisters. Their common sense rationality is revolted by our belief that Jesus will return after his presumed resurrection and ascension. Indeed today's observance of Ascension Day is one of those features of Christian faith that most infuriates our critics. And yet it is most endearing to us: this sublime trick of Jesus' presence by way of absence.

That's right: *presence by way of absence*. It is in his absence that Jesus becomes most precious to us as a longed-for focus for our deepest yearnings. And there is something more theological in Jesus' absence; something that goes beyond a psychology of missing persons—persons who are like a missing arm or missing leg we feel precisely because we miss it whenever we remember having it. Rather in the case of missing Jesus there abides a spiritual presence that we Christians claim to actually experience in everyday reality: the presence of another person whom we call "the Holy Spirit." Most notably this third person of the Holy Trinity is experienced as a fulfillment of prophecy: the prophecy where Jesus says in the gospel of John, chapter 16:

Your hearts are filled with sorrow [now]... But I tell you the truth, it is for your benefit that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. (John 16:6-7; Berean Study Bible <http://biblehub.com/john/16-7.htm>)

Church family, today's observance of Ascension Day invokes the divine strategy that is also a trick in the best sense of that word. But we declare that we are not being duped or deceived about Jesus returning after his death, resurrection and ascension. For with his absence we simultaneously experience a promissory person who comes to fill the void left by that absence. That's right. For centuries across time and space the Holy Spirit is experienced as yet another person who advocates to us the mysterious presence of realities that would otherwise appear absent. This reality of *presence in the midst of absence* was most compelling for Jesus' earliest followers. For instead of feeling sorrow, bereavement, abandonment or loss, as they might be expected to feel after his ascension they felt, to the contrary, a remarkable ecstasy of joy and anticipation. That joy and anticipation was fulfilled for them on the day of Pentecost with the descent of the Holy Spirit. And that descent and indwelling we will celebrate in churches across the world next Sunday, on Pentecost Sunday. And that indwelling we can experience by receiving in our own lives the promised gift of the Holy Spirit—if we will!

Here are today's scripture texts that make all these points compelling for us who believe—for us who are people of faith. In the reading from the first chapter of Acts we hear "about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven."

"This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now ... [and] you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem ... and to the ends of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight (Acts. 1.1-11).

And in our gospel reading from the end of Luke we find the following detail added:

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands ... While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God (Luke 24:50-53).

And so we too are among the generations of followers continually “blessing God.” We bless God for the presence of One who is otherwise absent among us, but who is now present through the advocacy of his promised Holy Spirit. Daily we experience evidence of his presence. Finally, in churches across the world today we pray in many different versions our opening prayer, the Collect appointed for Ascension Day, in this version adapted by the sisters in our Episcopal church Order of St. Helena in nearby Augusta, Georgia.

Let us pray:

O God, the Mighty One of glory, you have exalted
Jesus Christ with great triumph to your dominion in heaven:
Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to
strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior
Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and
the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen. <http://www.liturgy.co.nz/reflection/603a.html>