

Advent Mission The Prisoner

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] Let men declare among nations, the Lord is king. Let the sea roar and all the creatures in it. Let the fields exult and all that is in them.

Then let the trees of the forest shout for joy before the Lord when he comes to judge the earth. Now that's a poem of King David's, and that's a poem of exultation.

It's a poem in praise of his creator. And we know that King David must have gone through some terrible times in his life. When his son died, when he was being chased through the wilderness by his enemies.

And we know that it had been many, many terrible things in his life. But I think that he was able to grasp that poem and those words in his time of distress.

When he was crying out in his distress to the Lord, he was able to grasp that and hold on to it. Just as you who are in distress can, and just as I can right now.

[1 : 1 2] I want you to know Christ. He was a drunkard. When he became a Christian, he felt constrained to tell people about his encounter.

And he did so back in our church in Quebec. He told his story simply and quietly, confessing that his drinking problem wasn't yet solved, but by the grace of God it would be.

that he knew he was a new man. All in that church, I was there, all in that church, and especially the young people, they were deeply moved by his words.

But he was not a young man. And he died a few days later, consumed by the ravages of time and of alcohol. But his words live on in the minds of those who heard him, because he told them that the Lord was king in his life, just as King David did.

Now, I'm going to tell you a story about my wife. Those of you who have the good fortune to know my wife, know that she's a very sweet and gentle person.

[2 : 4 5] Maybe you don't know that her quiet persuasiveness is very powerful indeed. In our young married life, she was a Christian, and I was not.

She used to persuade me on occasion when my guard was down to go unwilling, and I mean unwilling, to church.

Most of the time I was bored silly, and very anxious to get the thing over with. One day, however, someone was reading a lesson.

I can't remember who it was. And part of it was like it bore a hole in my brain. Here are the words.

Without faith, it is impossible to please God. For anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who search for him.

[3 : 4 8] I just said to myself at the time, those words are true. I don't know why. It just didn't make logical sense to me that all of a sudden I could see a passage in the Bible and say, it's true.

Then the standard religious jargon would have it that the Holy Spirit was doing something wonderful and working in my life. I guess that's true too. At any rate, I started to go more often to church, and to listen to the lessons that were read, and it wasn't but a few months that I realized it was Jesus Christ who was the real author of those words.

I gave my life to him and became and am now a Christian. Now, that was 20 years ago. Some of you here weren't even born then.

Or at least, you'd be too young to remember. And some of you here are old enough to think that I'm a young upstart to get up and talk about my life with God when I've only had 20 years.

Nevertheless, I must. When we'd been Christians together about five years, I said to my wife one day, why are we so happy? And why are things going so well?

[5 : 04] You know, we're supposed to suffer. That's what we've been hearing at noon when Jim Packer was talking about suffering today. Last night, crying out to the Lord in your distress, we had led five enormously happy years as Christians.

And I said to her, why aren't we suffering? Because, you know, the Bible says that we're supposed to suffer. Well, I shouldn't have said it because the suffering came.

And it came in flows. And I felt like shaking my fist at God. and things do go badly. I lost a job because of incompetence.

And that hurts. Because you know that you're at fault and you know that you're hurting other people. And at the time, I was going to St. John's.

And I felt, well, you know, there's a lot of very rich and powerful and influential people here and they all dress very nice.

[6 : 08] and I went to the coffee one day and nobody talked to me. And I felt that all these rich and powerful people had nothing to do with me and that nobody, and I mean nobody in this church was suffering except me.

It got to the point I wouldn't go to the coffee. Then it got to the point I wouldn't go to church. And it got to the point that I was spiraling in and spiraling in like that, reveling in my own anguish and discomfort if you will, until finally one day my wife went to church and I didn't and I was gardening.

And all of a sudden I said to myself, what is wrong with you, Jack McLeod? You know, there must be something wrong. If you're afraid to go to church, you're supposed to be a Christian. So when church was over, I phoned Harry Robinson and I gave him a piece in my mind.

I said, you get over here right away, I want to talk to you. I said, look, I said, why is it I can't go to your church? You know, there's nobody there that's suffering like I am.

They're all rich and they're all happy and they're, you know, and here I am in my distress and there's no one to comfort me. And I was really bitter. Well, you know how quiet Harry is and we got to talking and we ended up performing a little Bible study with people that were like me and I found out after I started going back to church again that there were a lot of very friendly and wonderful people in St. John's Church.

[7 : 50] You know, you can lose sight of the Lord but you shouldn't. You should be able to exalt like David did. You should be able to exalt in your distress and when you're happy.

I'm proud to be a Christian and I hope that some of you here who are listening to these words tonight will become Christians. And I can, I can, I can exalt like David did.

You know, I can, I can say, I can say, I can roar with delight and I can exalt in the wonder and the joy of the Christian life because we as a family know Christ.

Now, I'm still suffering. We've got a kid that's, maybe we've done a little harm to because we haven't loved him enough, a kid that's left the house and is in trouble. We all suffer.

But I think, you know, we, we, we shouldn't expect to be happy all the time. That we can be Christians and exalt in the Lord and be happy in the face of it.

[9 : 05] Amen. It's very nice to see you all tonight and it's, it's very helpful to have had that sort of wonderful picture of how modern man knows everything about everything except his way home.

there was once a story of a, of a big man in a big Cadillac who came along a country road and found a small boy with a fishing pole over his shoulder hiking along the side of the road and, uh, the big man in the big Cadillac was lost and, uh, he stopped beside the boy and said, I'm, uh, looking for this town could you tell me where it is?

And the little boy said, no, I'm afraid I don't know where that town is. um, and the man said, well, I know that it's across a four-lane highway. Is there a four-lane highway anywhere near here?

And the little boy said, no, I don't know any four-lane highways anywhere near here. Well, I know that the four-lane highway crosses, there's a bridge on it and that means there's a big river somewhere.

Would you know where that river is? And he says, no, I don't know where that river is either. And, as the man, uh, started to fan his accelerator about to take off from that point, he said, uh, you don't know much, do you, boy?

[10 : 40] He said, I know my way home. Uh, and, uh, and I, I think that is a kind of lovely picture of, uh, of what, uh, what's being talked about tonight in that section of the psalm that we, that we're going to look at, which is the story, the first of four pictures about, about the wanderer.

And if you look again at your leaflet where the passage that Archie read for you is contained, you will see some wandered in the desert wastes.

And, uh, we're talking, I'm talking tonight about the wanderer and who the wanderer is. I think that this whole psalm is written really around, uh, around, it's a kind of Old Testament beatitude because I think that it's saying not blessed are the poor in spirit, but blessed is the wanderer when he gets to the point of crying out to the Lord.

And blessed is the prisoner when he sits in darkness and finally cries out to the Lord. And blessed is the sick fool who comes to the place where he cries out to the Lord.

And blessed is the overwhelmed person when he gets to the point where he cries out to the Lord. It's, uh, just a picture of how God brings blessing into different people's lives.

[12 : 20] and, uh, the wanderer is, uh, is a very powerful picture. There is, uh, there's a, a line by, uh, a contemporary American writer who is a Christian and he says, man is the only alien creature in the whole of the cosmos.

That's a powerful statement, isn't it? Off-drop number one. I, uh, I have to work on this basis. Man is the only alien creature in the whole of the cosmos.

Now, I think what that means is picked up in scripture. When you start with Cain, uh, when he kills his brother and he wanders away from the presence of God and becomes, as he says, a fugitive and a wanderer.

He goes from the garden to the wilderness and then spends his life trying to find the city. And, uh, the reason that he's wandering is because he has chosen to live, uh, in rebellion against God.

He was one picture of wandering. In the Old Testament, there's another picture of wandering. You remember the people came up out of the land of Egypt they crossed under Moses, they crossed the Red Sea, they came into the wilderness and they went right up to the borders of the promised land and they sent spies into the promised land and the spies having gone into the promised land saw the fruitfulness of it, saw the size of the armies and the size of the soldiers and came back and filled the people with fear so that they would not enter into the promised land that God had prepared them and for 40 years they wandered in the wilderness and it became a way of life for them and some had to die in the wilderness so that their fear and their anxiety and their turning back from the promise of God would not ultimately stand in the way of people going there you have you have a lovely picture in Deuteronomy chapter 26 when the man who is now in the promised land comes to offer his the first fruits of his harvest and he comes to the place which the Lord has appointed and he offers these and he is told to say this confession my father was a wandering

[15 : 30] Aramean that he would never forget that he had been brought from wandering into a promised land well that's why there is scripturally a kind of reinforcement of the picture that man is a perpetual wanderer and the reason that he wanders is because he is lost you know that that people like Burl Ives sing song I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger traveling through this land of woe or that other lovely cowboy song and cowboys are particularly good I think at catching the reality of wandering like the lone ranger across the west from town to town and never having a place where he ever settles down and that picture of the wandering man is all through music and literature and stories way back in 975 there is an early writing in in early

English called the wanderer the one who has lost his lord and wanders looking for the place where he can be welcomed back into the company of people that sense of lostness is something that I think is universal I don't think you have to be a Christian to know that you're wandering and you don't know where you're going the whole concept of being on a journey and not knowing where that journey is leading and wondering whether it's leading into blackness and into oblivion it's very hard not to feel that so I think in a wonderful way Psalm 107 by talking about the wanderer is not only referring to the history of the people of God who turned back from the promise of God it has infected the whole of mankind so that we become very much aware that we are a people who are in an alien universe somehow we don't belong and we're looking for a home and nothing here satisfies us my home is not down here

I don't know where it is but I know that it isn't here and that longing for a place that is home is so deeply embedded in all our minds and hearts and the difficulty is that we wander and wander and wander and never come to the place where we are meant to be there's a story I want to read to you about a couple of wanderers in the north woods of British Columbia about a century ago and I'll just read you the story it's from a book called Pack Saddles to the Tetchon Cache which I guess is up west of Jasper somewhere it talks about this time of year perhaps a little later and a cold snowy night a young Englishman and his wife decided to put in the winter trapping the man had found railroad work hard and having a little money was able to outfit comfortably for the winter having no horses of his own he hired a guide and a small pack train to take them out thirty miles to a good locality for fur along the wild hay river and after selecting a site for their cabin the guide and outfit left them from laziness or inexperience the shack they built was most uncomfortable the roof so low that only in the center of the floor could they stand upright without touching the joists a small sheet iron box stove without an oven was all they had for heating and cooking the weather up to new years was cold although the snowfall was light fur was plentiful but the couple did not get nearly enough moose meat put by their first difficulty came when their moccasins began to wear out and they did not have any tanned moose ready to repair them neither did they have the necessary skill eventually the woman had to wrap her feet in gunny sacking and canvas luckily about this time they fell in with a native family from whom they got new moccasins but not before their feet had been slightly frostbitten climax of their troubles came one day when they left their cabin to visit traps some miles away they intended to camp out and to retrace their trail next day towards evening however the weather broke and snow began to fall they decided to take a brief rest and then head home before the weather got worse within a short distance they found that their tracks had been covered by snow in the growing darkness they missed their way instead of camping at once and waiting out the night waiting for daylight they made the mistake common to most inexperienced persons in the bush they pushed on thinking they would soon strike some familiar spot before long they were lost they had very little grub and very few matches they made a fire and sat by it during the long hours of that

January night by daybreak there was more than a foot of fresh snow they traveled all day and as is usual in such cases found themselves going in the wrong direction towards evening a native trapper crossed their trail he recognized the snowshoes as white men's and noticed that one pair was exceptionally small his curiosity was aroused and he followed them when he caught up with them they were in desperate straits but he helped them to make a good camp and fed them from the food he was carrying next day he led them safely home tired but very thankful for their narrow escape except for sore feet they were none the worse for their experience they decided that they had had enough and set out for the railway again well you see when people are lost this story illustrates they they go the wrong way because every way seems right to them they keep moving when they should keep still it's uh it's hard

I think to be still and probably the chief characteristic of our wandering is the terrible restlessness the terrible desire we have to go on and on in the hope that we'll find where it is we're meant to go in psalm 107 we find that the wanderers were hungry they were thirsty and they were weary and Jesus picks up this picture of hunger and thirst and weariness and he says to the people who are wandering and lost I am the way and to the people who are thirsty I am the water of life and to the people who are hungry I am the bread of life the people who are weary come to me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will refresh you well that's that's the picture of the wanderer and that's who you and I are that's the restlessness that's in our hearts that's why the picture in the

[24 : 12] Bible is so often the picture of people being lost and yet because we are lost among others who are equally lost as you saw illustrated for you tonight the lady who's so anxious to build up the choir is lost and the insurance man who's so anxious to sell a policy is lost and the lady of the street who has only one thing in mind is lost and that lostness is almost a pervasive disease in the whole of our society which we can't confess one to another you may remember Psalm Psalm 1 which which talks about blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly neither stands in the way of sinners neither sits in the seat of the scornful but his delight is in the law of the

Lord and therein does he meditate day and night he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water that he will bear fruit in due season and it says the ungodly are not so but are like the chaff which the wind drives away but then it concludes with but the Lord knows the way of the righteous and somehow that's the thing that we've got to find we've got to find the way we've got to know where it is that we're that we're going and our life consists of a search for the way and in our hearts and in our lives is the consciousness that we are lost and being lost how do we turn and find the way well

I suppose that I suppose that the thing that most of us belong to is a kind of conspiracy that suggests that if we're all lost together it doesn't much matter if any of us find a way it's as though in the in the situation in which in which we are nobody wants to ask the question nobody wants to raise the problem nobody wants to say where are we going what are we doing nobody wants to acknowledge the reality of our lostness and so we come to the place where in psalm 107 some wandered in deserts finding no way to a city to dwell in hungry and thirsty their souls fainted within them and then they cried to the lord in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress i i don't particularly have anything against against whistler mountain as a place to ski but as a kind of spiritual symbol of our age it could be a kind of symbol of lostness in that carved out of the wilderness is that little community where people find physical refreshment and they find great beauty and they find excitement and they find companionship and they find warmth and they find friends and they find society they find all sorts of things and the whole structure of the community is built around going up a hill in order to turn around and come down again and that's what happens and if you were to ask anybody where are you going they would say up the hill and what are you going up the hill for in order to come down the hill then why bother her but yeah it's you know

I it's it's just that symbolically it represents a kind of lostness in our society a kind of awareness us that we're we're we're not particularly going anywhere now I I don't want what I've said to spread beyond just the just the just the few of us here I I'd feel badly if they went and closed it down just because actually I have every confidence that it'll survive in spite of what I have to say about it but it's it's that kind of mutual conspiracy that we as human beings get into where we in a sense refuse to allow anyone to ask the questions that need to ask that need to be asked like where are we and you know that that original story of the news is good and the news is bad and the pilot saying the good news is that we're traveling at just over 600 miles an hour and the bad news is that we're lost and the the the kind of thing about our society is we take great pride in the kind of measure of our progress and the measure of our accomplishment but where we're going is a question that we were not allowed to ask and if you do ask the question you in a sense step outside the social conventions to which you are in which we are all heavily compromised and maybe in the quiet of our own hearts cry out to the

Lord and ask that he will deliver us he will deliver us from this lostness and when you read on in that section of the psalm which we're looking at tonight tonight he said he led them he delivered them from their distress he led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in you know that by faith Abraham sought for a city whose maker and builder was God and the whole sort of picture of our spiritual journey is a picture as I think you heard from pilgrim's progress last night as a kind of long journey towards the city of God towards the place where God intends that we should come and that we shouldn't wander around like the children of Israel who did not have the faith to enter in to the promises that God had made for them and the land that he had prepared for them and I think that this is why in a sense we are like Cain who went out from the presence of the

[32 : 43] Lord and was a wanderer and a fugitive on the face of the earth and simply because we do not want to come to the place that God has prepared for us when we get tired of wandering and when we're hungry enough and when we're thirsty enough and when our souls have fainted within us then we cry out to the Lord and say tell him what our troubles are and allow him to lead us by a straight way till we reach the city to dwell in to which he wants to bring us could I give you a beautiful picture of how that is consummated in scripture this whole theme of wandering is wonderfully consummated in in the in the book of the revelation in chapter 7 and verse 13 it says one of the elders addressed me saying who are these clothed in white robes and whence have they come and I said to him sir you know and he said to me these are they who have come out of the great tribulation they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb therefore are they before the throne of God and serve him day and night within his temple and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence they shall hunger no more neither thirst anymore the sun shall not strike them nor any scorching heat for the lamb in the midst of them sorry the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes and it's it's that picture of

God finally bringing us through our wandering to the place that he has purposed that we should come bringing us to the place of the fulfillment of the promises that he has made to us and only after we have come to the point where in our humiliation in the recognition of our lostness in the recognition of the aimlessness of our wandering we cry to the Lord in our distress and he hears us and redeems us and delivers us let me just put before you that picture of how Jesus does that how he has worked it out that we come to the place that he wants us to be and in order to prepare you for that I want you to sing first a hymn which is in the blue prayer book or the blue hymn book and it's number 459 and this is the wanderer's hymn it's in a minor key and people well known and well loved by me have never heard it before so one of the brilliant illustrations that appeared at the time that

Stephen Neal took a mission to the University of Toronto some many years ago the varsity which corresponds to the UBC printed a cartoon which has remained engraved in my mind ever since I saw it and the cartoon which I've told some of you about I'm sure illustrated a small lamb that was cowering behind a great rock out in an open wilderness and finally a shepherd arrives staff in hand and he comes up to the wee lamb and the wee lamb says lost hell no I'm hiding now that was I guess the feeling that Bishop Stephen

Neal gave to the students of the University of Toronto they didn't want to be considered as lost they thought they were hiding and I don't think there's very much difference between being lost and hiding it's one of the most disappointing things when you are playing a game of hide and seek to find a perfect hiding place so that people give up looking for you it's a very sad situation and the difficulty in our society is that there isn't very much difference between when you look at them between the people who are lost and the people who are hiding the people who are wandering aimlessly and the people who are on their way somewhere who are going somewhere and I think in response to these verses in 107 is that particular verse in the gospel according to

St. John which all of you should know by heart coming as it does in the 6th verse of the 14th chapter where Jesus says I am the way and I think that's all that he says you would be familiar as I am familiar going up to somebody and saying could you tell me where and they saying yes you go right down there four blocks turn right keep to your right the next to your left and you'll find it the third house on your right that's the way the particular and significant thing about what Jesus did when people came to him and said I'm lost and I'm looking for the way Jesus said I am the way and he was pointing to a very personal relationship with him now a lot of people in our society have in a sense gone on great pilgrimages and great treks to remote parts of the world perhaps halfway up the

[39 : 45] Himalayan mountains to find a guru who will say that's the way that you should go people will pay counselors and they will pay all sorts of people who will stand up and say that's what you should do that's where you should put your money that's the road you should travel but Jesus does not the wanderer he says to him I am the way and the reason that I think he says that is there is a I think a 6th century Chinese philosopher called Lao Tsi who in contemplation and in the study of the sayings of Confucius indeed he was thought to be a student of Confucius said that the way is action free of self motive in other words to be able to act without any selfish motive at all that's the way when the encyclopedia described this it says it's very much like what appears in the first chapter of the gospel according to

Saint John where it says in the beginning was the word so that you can put four words together from the New Testament Jesus can say I am the word I am the truth I am the life I am the way and those are the things that the wanderer needs he needs to know the word which God gives him he needs to know the truth about God he needs to know the life which is from God and he needs to know the way in which to live his life now I again in George McDonald's books there is a wealthy lady comes to this gentleman who is a sort of gentleman physician in the slums of London and she wants to know what she should do in order to help him with his work among the poor people she has some talents and a good deal of money now what do you want me to do and he said

I don't know what I want you to do and she became increasingly offended because George McDonald in this novel by him would not tell her what to do and she insisted well who do you have working with you he said we have a great many people who work with me and who is their director we don't have a director and do you have meetings together no we don't have meetings together well what do you do we only do one thing and you need only do one thing and that is allow Jesus himself to lead you you go to him and he will tell you because he is the way and he is the truth and he is the light and what Jesus is saying to the wanderer when he says I am the way he wants the wanderer to take him very seriously and to recognize that being in the way is being in a personal relationship with

Jesus Christ a moment by moment day by day fellowship with Jesus Christ not following a high and admirable principle of acting from any motive but that of self not that but living in direct and personal relationship to Jesus Christ now there is a famous story in the gospels about a wanderer who found the way and that wanderer is the prodigal son who asking his father for the inheritance which was to come to him went into a far country and spent his money and riotous living and when he came to the point where he was feeding pigs carrying a pail of pig's will and looking deeply into it he said Eric says of him he came to himself when the wanderer comes to himself when he comes to the point where he says to

God he cries to the Lord in his trouble he said he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat and coming to himself he laid out a plan for himself and the plan was I will go to my father and I will say to my father father I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no more worthy to be called your son make me as one of your hired servants and what happened then was that he started home and when he came in sight of home the father who was watching for him ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and he started out with his little speech father I have sinned before God and before you and I am no more worthy to be called your son and then he never completed the speech because the father embraced him and welcomed him and was so overjoyed in his presence now what

[45 : 31] I think that indicates just for our purposes right here and right now is that we might think that we can come to God with a purpose in our minds which in which we think will be acceptable to him and say God this is what I want to do for you make me as one of your hired service I don't need anything special just let me do that but God on the other hand is so happy and so loving and so gracious in receiving us to himself that it's the relationship to us that he wants and he wants us to live not in obedience to the fellowship of a relationship to him as a person that's how we come to Jesus Christ and we live out of that relationship that's what it means when the hymn says if thou but suffer God to guide me if you will live out of that relationship to

Jesus Christ so that the central reality in your life must be the relationship to Jesus Christ now I know that that's hard for us I know how far we have wandered away from it and I know how regularly we wander away from it but that's what he wants to bring us back to we're going to end the service in a few minutes when the service ends we're going to have tonight as we did last night an epilogue service over there in the chapel and in the chapel it will be explained to you very simply how you do what the psalm suggests you do cry to the Lord in your trouble some have said to me you have to be in trouble before you get into a relationship with Jesus Christ and I would like to say no you don't you're already in trouble you don't have to you may not recognize it but you are and that's why what we want to do is to give you the opportunity of showing you how in a very direct and very simple way you establish a relationship with

Jesus Christ it may be for you the opportunity to renew a relationship with Jesus Christ Dr. Packer pointed out to us today at noon how many people have been disappointed in their spiritual lives disappointed by things which have occurred to them which have happened in the course of their lives and they very much need to renew their relationship to Jesus Christ as soon as we begin to use anything but our relationship to him as a guide to our lives then we're lost again and we need to come back to that so to establish a relationship with Jesus Christ to renew a relationship with Jesus Christ I invite you to come and hear the very simple presentation that will be made in the chapel directly this service is over and and then I want the rest of you to leave quickly that is

I'd love you to come over for coffee to the hall next door there are books there's displays there's opportunity for discussion there will be a review of an important book that you would probably like to have and certainly like to hear about and so I'd like you all to move over there as quickly as possible so that the epilogue service can begin over here I don't want to unduly persuade you in the matter of staying for the epilogue service but I do want you to recognize that we do have to come to that place and to be in that place where having cried to the Lord in our trouble we allow him to deliver us we allow him to have his way in our lives to the wanderer Jesus says I am the way and no one makes his way to the father but by me and if

Jesus is the way and we are the wanderer then there has to be that moment in which the wanderer finds the way the way which we're told in the psalm is a straight way leading us to the city to dwell in the city where we stand in his presence and offer to him our whole heart's worship so will you consider that the epilogue service tonight may in fact be meant for you and if it is you will be welcome to the service that follows this service immediately service