



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 8, 2019
DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20; PSALM 1; PHILEMON 1-21; LUKE 14:25-32

AWAKE ON AN ISLAND



Luke 14:25-32 [Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."]

Kathy and I returned earlier this week from Scotland and the Northumbria region of

England where we made pilgrimage to several ancient Christian sites that share the stories

of our forebears in faith. I was there principally doing reconnaissance for a similar trip next year for a group from Saint Mark's. We will have more information about that trip available in the next few weeks.

Today I'd like to share a brief story about a young girl we encountered on Lindisfarne Island in northeast England where St. Aidan and twelve Celtic monks established a community in the year 635. The island can be accessed only at low tide, across a causeway that is under water much of the time, tethered by the moon's weight. No ferries or bridges, and there is a keen sense of standing outside any normal concept of time when on the island. Indeed, Lindisfarne is known simply as the Holy Island.

After celebrating the Eucharist in the church that dates from the 12th Century, Kathy and I made our way through the ruins of the early Christian communities who lived there, walked the beach and ambled through the small village that 140 year-round residents call home. Everyone else is at the mercy of tidal rhythms to get on or off the island. We had a bit of free time before the causeway would reopen, so we made our way to Pilgrims' Café in the village, at the suggestion of a local who worked at our hotel back on the mainland. We were not disappointed.

The coffee shop is aptly named—there were several other pilgrims in queue to place their orders. While waiting for Kathy's coffee to be delivered at the end of the counter, a father and his daughter, who was probably five, stood nearby waiting for their order to be served. The father had turned his attention elsewhere when their tray with a chocolate brownie was deposited right in front of the girl at eye level who instantly spied the brownie, then closed her eyes and drew a long deep breath in through her nose to smell the delectable treat. "That is lovely." She was fully present in the moment.

This little girl and her brownie engagement became iconic for us as we made our way along the pilgrimage, inviting us to a practice of mindfulness, of presence, intent on using all five senses in an effort to enjoin the world around us, and discover the hand of God at work in our midst.

Pilgrimage is designed to invite us to stand outside the norms of everyday life, and be vigilant for God. The truth is that God is always present, but in the midst of our busy lives, our senses are often dulled to that divine presence. Pilgrimage is designed to cajole us out of the doldrums, or to step off the phrenetic wheel of hurried existence, and experience life as it was intended, full in,

alive, aware, and keen to the connections across time and space.

Vacation is purposeful in its recreational tilt, but it is not pilgrimage. Nor is the mountaintop experience, as wonderfully inspiring as it may be, and may invoke a presence of God in the moment, but one must always descend the mountain, and then what? Pilgrimage is not escape; it is designed to reshape life upon return to normalcy, such that it is no longer simply “normal,” if that means returning to desensitized busy-ness.

This is why Christians have for centuries claimed pilgrimage as a spiritual practice worthy of our embrace, to step away and hone our senses from time to time against the whetstone of wakefulness.

And this is the backdrop for me this week as I engaged our scriptures, contemplating a sermon in this place I call home, among the people with whom I choose to live, and whom I love dearly.

This passage from Luke’s gospel is challenging us to consider a transformed way of being in the world. The translation stops us short, with its talk of hating one’s family, even life itself. Releasing our grasp on possessions. To be a disciple requires something different, something that upends the normalcy of life.

It is important to understand that the word translate as “hate” carries little of the emotional energy we attribute to that word in our modern lexicon. It is the verb describing a de-emphasis or turning from one thing, to allow it to be less important in our lives, SO THAT another thing is emphasized, so that the other can become more important. It calls for a reorientation.

Jesus is inviting us to calculate, to measure, to take stock of what we deem important in our lives, but more than that, he is inviting us to consider how those important things can become idols in our lives, those to which we orient preferentially above all else, even our relationship with God.

There is no evidence that Jesus hated his mother Mary, if by that we mean he despised her, or refused to be in relationship with her. There is ample evidence that they remained connected, but not fused. She was at the foot of the cross as he was dying, and his concern for her well-being was transferred to his disciple and friend, John.

So the invitation here is not about jettisoning your family to some scrapyard of neglect. It is about ordering one’s life to ensure the family, or possessions, or wealth, or fame, or education, or the prestige are all seen as worldly attachments that may lend meaning, and for which we can give thanks to God, but

must not serve as our god. Unless you hate those gods, this life of discipleship will not work.

Which means this life of discipleship is hard work, and not for the faint of heart. It is much easier to hold fast to that which can be held or possessed, but in the end, those misplaced devotions will surely slip through your fingers, and you will find yourself grasping at the air around you for a more steadfast lifeline.

There is so much more to life, and Jesus is saying follow him into that life, where God is God, family is family, possessions are possessions, each noun with its right, good and joyful verb, and the ordering of our affiliations trues up with the syntax of abundant life.

You need not go to Scotland to turn into this truth—the invitation is right under your nose, waiting for you to experience God as God, and everything else as other than God, and hold it all lightly as you make your way through this pilgrimage we call the Christian way and life on this island home we call Earth.

References

Photo from English Heritage Foundation which maintains the historic island's treasures.
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/lindisfarne-priory/History/>

