

Trinity Church
July 19, 2009

The 7th Sunday after Pentecost
RCL. Year B, Proper 11

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

May goodness and mercy follow us all our days, and may we dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. Amen.

Reading Mark's Gospel in course over the last several weeks has shown us the extent of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. He preached extensively in the village synagogues; he offended the hometown congregation with his sermon, and they threw him out; Jesus healed many who came to him with various illnesses, and he was able to drive out the demons and bring the possessed peace. He trained and sent out his disciples into the villages to carry his ministry to others. He suffered the death of the forerunner, John the Baptizer, and was himself in trouble with Herod, the Jewish tetrarch of Galilee. Time to take a break, to get a new perspective, rest, and regain strength for the work ahead. Jesus said to his disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile."

Isn't this what July and August are all about? Carve out some summer time, kick back, go to the beach or the mountains, relax, eat burgers and potato salad on a picnic with the kids and grandkids, read a mindless summer novel. Rest. Regain perspective to re-engage life and work. Times of rest and disengagement are not discretionary — they are essential to our health and wellbeing. And they are not discretionary for our spiritual lives either. Times to step aside to pray and renew our relationship with God, as we do every Sunday, are essential.

And more so now than ever. This has been a very difficult year for everyone. Every business has had to adjust jobs and operations to meet the economic downturn; every institution has had to re-think staffing and scholarships and services. Every household has had to revisit expectations and adjust plans, and trim the lifestyle. Everyone needs a break, even a brief and modest break, to rest.

For those who are professional worriers, stepping aside when there is much to worry about seems foolish. Shouldn't we "keep our eye on the ball," as my father liked to say; or "keep your nose to the grindstone," as my mother would agree? Detachment is especially important for those of us who worry, because it invites us to trust in God, to turn to Christ for the affirmation of our true worth, to seek God's grace for the living of these days. Jesus had no problem stepping aside from the ministry to which he was called. He trusted that God's purpose would be at work in prayer as in action, in rest as in work. So, "they went away in a boat to a deserted place by themselves."

There were a few years here at Trinity when my family was sure our summers were jinxed. We would arrive in New Hampshire, get unpacked, open the house, pick up the kids from various colleges, and tuck into a picnic supper on the lawn, and the phone would ring, and a member of the staff at Trinity was calling to resign their position for a new job in the fall. And then Dad would have to spend lots of time on the phone. This happened several years running. For awhile, I thought the staff had a pact that no one would change positions unless I was on vacation. Right after that call, the Elder from the North Wilmot Church would call. "I saw your car in the drive. Glad you're up for the summer. Now, we have one Sunday in August that we can't seem to fill. I know that you will want to preach for us." Debbie is standing behind me, making faces as if our continued marriage depended on my saying no. I would hang up. Deb would scold me. "You never could say no! I don't know what to do with you." That is when I would

point out that Jesus had this same problem on his vacation. That when he arrived at his vacation spot, there was a crowd waiting, and he felt compelled to teach them, and when the sick begged him for attention, he laid hands on them. He had compassion on them because, he said, “they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

When Jesus said, “they are like sheep without a shepherd,” he was saying more than you might think. This is not a throw-away reference to the 23rd psalm, despite the fact that we used it as our prayer today. No, Jesus was referring to the 27th chapter of the Book of Numbers. The people of the Hebrews had come to Mt. Nebo, and the great prophet Moses, while he was allowed to look across the Jordan to the Promised Land, was told by God that he would not be leading the people there. His ministry and his life were at an end. Moses prayed that in God’s good time God would raise up for the people a prophet like himself, so that the people “would not be like sheep without a shepherd.”

What Jesus was saying to his disciples was that those who followed Jesus, even to a deserted place apart, came to him because they were without a shepherd, and that Jesus was the answer to Moses’ prayer. God had lifted him up to be like Moses, and lead those who believe, through his death and resurrection, from death to sin into newness of life. They were coming to Jesus because he is the way and the truth, and healing and life.

When we go away on a vacation, we don’t just go anywhere. We go where we find renewed life. We go to be close to the One who is truth and life. We draw close to Jesus. We have nowhere else to go. He is our refreshment and our life.

In the 6th chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. He taught disturbing and difficult truths. His disciples said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” After this, John writes, “many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him.” Jesus said to the twelve, “Will you also go away?” Peter was the one who answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

There have been times when I was so confused about the place of God in my life that I wanted more than anything to flee, just to give up believing and go away. You have been there too, I know.

But then I ask Peter’s question: But where would I go? Where else can I find God except in Jesus, the one who is the way to God? Without him, I am a sheep without a shepherd. Out in the wilderness with no one to lead me. And so I return — you, O Christ, you have the words of eternal life. You are my Moses, the holy one of God.

When you kick back and take that summer vacation, brief or extended, and seek out that place of refreshment and healing, wherever that is, Christ will have gone there before, waiting like a good shepherd for you, his tired and lost sheep. And he will have compassion on you, and when you hear his words, he will lift you up into himself, and you will be at peace. Your holiday, a holy day indeed. “Come away to a deserted place, all by yourselves, and rest awhile.” O Lamb of God, I come, I come. Amen.