Pentecost 7

Ez. 2:1-5 Ps. 123 2 Cor. 12:2-10 Mark 6:1-13

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church July 7, 2024

Our Gospel text for this morning presents us with the story about Jesus sending his disciples out into the villages of Galilee to call people to repentance, to cast out demons and to heal the sick. And as Jesus prepares them to go, we hear his admonition to his disciples about what they should pack in preparation for their journey.

This is the first time in Mark's Gospel that the disciples have been commissioned to go out bearing the Good News of God's kingdom without Jesus. And as the travel agent in charge of all mission trips, Jesus wants to make sure the disciples know what to pack for the journey.

The list is brief if you take verses 8 and 9 as the guide… "He ordered them to take nothing for the journey except a staff," Mark writes… "no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics." … which means the things the disciples were **allowed** to bring with them were limited to a staff, sandals and one tunic. A pretty skimpy list of you ask me…

A list that would ensure a certain vulnerability on the Disciples' part, for the sake perhaps of the same thing Paul spoke of in our second lesson for this morning, as he boasted gladly of his **weakness**, saying that being emptied of his strengths made more room for the grace of God to work in and through him as he went out to proclaim the Gospel in his own day…

As Jesus sent his disciples out with so few of the supports usually deemed necessary for any journey, it must have felt to them at first a bit like "Mission impossible"… Not only because the disciples lacked the normal traveling gear, but also because the world into which they were going wasn't exactly eager to receive either the disciples or their message…

A point Mark makes in today's Gospel text as he tells of the hostile reception Jesus received from his friends and neighbors in his hometown of Nazareth… And in the verses following the commissioning of the disciples, which tell the story of the beheading of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod… (Already, by the 6th chapter of Mark's Gospel, it was very clear what kind of reception the world would give Jesus and those who bore witness to the up-side-down, counter-cultural kingdom he brought to bear in the world…)

All of which leads me to believe that the disciples must have added some other things to their "mission impossible bags," both before they left on their journey and as they traveled from village to village… some things besides a staff, a pair of sandals and one tunic… things that were less tangible and more interior in nature…

The thing is, according to Mark's telling of the story, by the time Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs to preach the good news, the disciples had already witnessed Jesus' healing power on behalf of the sick, the lame, the outcast, and the demon-possessed… They had already seen him come toe-to-toe with the religious authorities, leaving those authorities reeling and wondering what in the world had just happened… They had already heard him speak in parables, and experienced Jesus' calming of a stormy sea…

Suggesting to me that while the disciples were sent out with very few tangible things in their traveling bags, they must have added the

healing, transforming, challenging, liberating things they had witnessed in the presence of Jesus…

And not only those things, but other things as well… other intangible internal things they could call upon in particular moments when the going got tough, although Mark doesn't say so… (reminding me of the wisdom of the old rabbis who used to say that while the words of Scripture are very important, it's the white spaces between the words that are more important still, as that's where the fire is, inviting our imaginations to mingle with the words and the teachings on the page to create something new… something with the power to lift our heads and stir our hearts and raise us from the dead)…

Entering those white spaces on the page allows me to wonder, for example… Could it be that a disciple or two might have added to their "mission impossible bags"…

- the memory of a sunrise over the Sea of Galilee… or a night-sky ablaze with stars?
- Could one of them have added to his bag an unexpected act of tenderness he witnessed along the way, or an image from a poem shared with him over supper one evening?
- Could one of them, reaching into the deepest part of himself, have included in his bag the most heart-wrenching passages from the Bach Double Violin Concerto before those passages even found their way to Bach's ear?
- Could one of the disciples, distraught and anxious about what might lie ahead, have added to his bag the words from Isaiah, "Do not fear, I have called you by name. You are mine"?

What I appreciate about our Gospel text for this morning is the way it invites us into the white spaces between the words to consider not only what the disciples might have added to their "mission impossible" bags as they set out to bear witness to the healing, liberating love of God in Jesus… But also to consider the things **we** might bring with us should we decide to go out into the world to do the same…

What I appreciate about this text is the way it asks us to enter its white spaces and to ponder a very important question for our time… this one… "In this day, fraught as it is with so much division, acrimony, fear, hatred, injustice, saber-rattling, suffering and war… In this day in which we find ourselves at our wit's end, what might we put into our mission impossible bags that could inspire, shape and support our witness on behalf of God's liberating and healing kin-dom?'"

It would be a lovely thing for us to share our thoughts in response to this question… Certainly in such sharing, we would speak about how the gifts of the Church can inspire and support us in our work on behalf of the Gospel… gifts that include our baptisms, the Eucharist, prayer, Scripture and one another…

But as I've had time to consider how I might respond to the question… as I've spent a bit of time in the white spaces between the words of our Gospel text for this morning and the larger story of God's love made known in Jesus, I will share with you two images I'm holding onto for dear life in this present moment… two images which for me offer some help and some hope for what sometimes feels in this world to be a "mission impossible."

The first image is the very image we have on the flag outside our building this morning, along with the sign, “Love Thy Neighbor”… the image of the Deer Isle Bridge as created by our own Siri Beckman…

- Now maybe it’s because I still have deeply imprinted on my memory the glorious Sunday afternoon just two weeks ago when over 1,000 of us walked over the Deer Isle Bridge in celebration of its 85th birthday…
- Maybe it’s because it seemed to me to be a celebration not only of the way that bridge has connected Deer Isle with the rest of the world over so many decades, but also of the way 1,000 people, many of whom didn’t know each other, were connected under a clear-blue sky with Eggemoggin Reach stretching out before us on both sides… no divisions between young and old, local and from away, Republican and Democrat…
- Maybe it’s because there are so many Gospel stories that begin with the words, “Then Jesus crossed over to the other side”… meaning the Gentile side, the “unclean side,” the side of the “other”, thereby connecting or “bridging” people who, in Jesus’ day, would never have been in relationship with one another…
- Maybe it’s because I recognize how difficult it is in my own life to “cross over to the other side” for the sake making relationship with those who are different from me… And how, just like our own Marilyn Verhey, who always needed someone to drive her over the Deer Isle Bridge because she was so terrified to make the trek on her own, I too need “bridge accompaniers”…
- Maybe it’s because I’ve had such bridge accompaniers in my own life, who have opened my eyes and heart to see a sister or a brother in what was once an “other…”

I'm not sure… I only know that were I to decide to go out into the world to bear witness to the liberating healing love of God in this day, the image of the bridge would need to go into my "mission impossible" bag… Both to remind me of the Love that reaches across every divide to reconcile and restore what is broken and fractured, **and** to inspire me to be about this work in our broken and suffering world…

As for the second image… It's one I've held close to my heart for months… wanting to speak of it so many times, but being hesitant to do so for fear it sounds too extreme… too apocalyptic and dire and fatalistic…

It's the image of something that took place on the Titanic as it was going down… The image of the musicians setting out chairs and music stands on the deck of the ship as passengers frantically searched for loved ones and scrambled for life-boats… The image of the musicians in the midst of the chaos and horror of impending death, taking their instruments out of their cases, sitting down, and playing music…

Can you imagine it? Just to imagine it takes my breath away. And I share this image with you this morning not to suggest I think we as a nation or as a world are going down like the Titanic, but to suggest that it speaks to one of things I know needs to go into my "mission impossible bag" as we face so many frightening and uncertain times…

I share this image with you because last weekend, as I officiated at two Episcopal funerals; one here, in thanksgiving for the life of Marilyn Verhey, and one at Trinity Episcopal Church in Castine in thanksgiving for a member there, I recognized in the Episcopal service for the Burial of the Dead an image not unlike the musicians playing music on the Titanic…

An image offered in the most beautiful words in the whole of the funeral service… Words that read this way…

You only are immortal, O God, the creator and maker of humankind. And we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth we shall return. For so did you ordain when you created us saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.

This is the image I need most to put into my "mission impossible" bag, because the promise to which it points makes the "impossible" possible. The promise that Paul came to see as he left his strengths behind, making room in his weakness for the grace of God to work in and through him as he went out to proclaim the Gospel in his own day…

The promise about which he spoke this way, saying… *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Knowing this to be true gives us the capacity to sing even at the grave… the capacity to take our instruments out of their cases and to make music no matter the circumstance… no matter the devastations in which we find ourselves… even when the ship is going down…

What a beautifully defiant and life-giving image to put into our "mission impossible bags"… What a beautifully defiant and life-giving image to take with us should we decide to out into our suffering and broken world bearing witness to the liberating, healing love of God made known in Jesus…

Even at the grave we sing Love's song…

So dear ones, we are being invited this morning by our Gospel text to enter not only the words on the page, but the white spaces between the words… and there, along with the story of the God made known in Jesus, along with the gifts of the Church, to plumb the depths of the white spaces in search of the images and the promises that can sustain and inspire and nourish us for the journey…

Because these are the gifts that will make the "mission impossible" not only possible, but beautiful, and authentic and life-giving and true… The very things the world is most desperately in need of in this moment…

Shall we go then…

- into the words that tell the story of Jesus,
- into the fire of the white spaces between the words,
- and into the uncertainties of the world,

trusting that what we need for the journey is in our midst if we have eyes to see and ears to hear? Trusting that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?

Shall we go and see what's possible when the story we live by is a story of "alleluias" sung even at the grave?