

Take Nothing for the Journey

6th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9 (14) B, 2021

I don't know this for sure, but I suspect that I'm not the only spouse on the planet whose partner's accused them of taking this gospel to heart, and this line from it in particular, when packing for vacation. Specifically, the accusation came to me as we were unpacking one day in a place we'd rented for the week. This was years ago, but not that many years ago, and I should add that the accusation came for good reason, as I had neglected to pack a) sunscreen, b) suitable trousers for a nice evening out, and c) my swim towel and goggles. In my defense – but there is no defense against forgetfulness, particularly when it is habitual, not really – so, by way of explanation – but that doesn't matter, either. There may be forgiveness of sins offered, thanks be to God and grace unmerited even to the greatest of sinners, but there is no redemption open to one who has, metaphorically, spilled the soup. “A bag, at least, you did manage to bring,” it was noted, “though I'm guessing no bread, and no money in your purse, either. But at least you managed not to forget your staff and sandals.”

Yup: even *in extremis*, yours truly is a man of the gospel, it would seem. But staff and sandals are necessities; I even managed to bring them today. Sunscreen? Wear a hat and long sleeves, and stay in the shade. Trousers? At the height of summer? Insisting upon them would violate both the 8th Amendment and the Geneva Convention. Towel and goggles? Air dry like Jesus did at his very own baptism, and don't put your face in the water. It's safer that way. For everything else, there's MasterCard™. (“Money in your purse,” as Jesus and, in a different context, Shakespeare's Iago put it.)

Yes, one can be forgetful, especially as one ages, and memory spends its precious energy on regret for paths not taken, or remorse for the ones one did pursue, or on ancient explanations of the Trinity, the atomic structures of carbon isotopes, or the

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regnal dates of the monarchs of England since Alfred. But one has not intentionally planned to get it wrong or under-prepare, which is what the gospel story today leads us to hear from Jesus's own lips. You will go forth, he tells his disciples, with nothing but the tunic on your back, and cast out sickness and demons in my name. You will rely on the kindness of strangers, and curse them when they are unkind. For they will be – and they will not believe. They will not believe. They will not believe even when they see with their own eyes the power of God working through us. “You will be amazed at this,” he tells them. “I know I was.”

Jesus's directive that his followers go forth this way comes after he is rejected by the people in his hometown. A prophet may be nowhere else without honor, he muses wryly, as they even weaponize his family against him. “Is this not the brother of James, of Joses, and of little Simon, the one who wants to be a lawyer?” they ask. “How could anyone from that most ordinary and landless of families heal the sick and cast out demons? How dare he speak as though he knows something.”

Yep, Jesus concluded. They can see a thing and not believe it. They can say it out loud and not believe it, or even understand it. They heard me speak wisdom and they decided it was foolishness. They watched me heal the sick and decided I hadn't done it, not really, that it couldn't be me, or couldn't be good. Live within the foursquare light-gray walls of their expectations and their nerves are at peace. Put one foot out of their comfort zone and they howl.

So, he figures, if going about them from strength to strength won't convince them, how about weakness? “Take nothing for the journey,” he tells his own, except staff and sandal. Show them you have nothing – show them that you didn't earn wages for all this in the next town back, or didn't get the people there to give you anything worth keeping. Christ, he didn't even let them bring food of their own, or a bowl to use to beg it of others. “Where I am weak, there I will be strong” appears to be the lesson he would like them to internalize. This is not a business, a con game, or

some other kind of scam, people. This is real life, and it matters – and real life is not quite compatible with ignorance, comfort zones, or the inability to adapt and change. It calls you out – it calls us all out – and we must respond.

Let the record show that he gave them more than his father (his heavenly Father) had done for his, Jesus's, own time of testing. He had no bread, no money, no purse, and as far as we can tell no staff or sandal, either, for his time in the desert being tempted by the devil, Old Hob, Satan the accuser, the Father of Lies. From weakness into strength, indeed. He let them wear sandals on their feet and carry a staff in their hands, which by contrast is also favoritism. Their feet are shod and they can balance against fatigue and the storm. No way they could fail, now.

Still, wandering hither and yon in the name of Jesus and with his power, relying on people you've not met, and being ready to curse or bless them as the case may be, does not sound very pleasant. On such a journey, famished, rank, and risking dehydration and heatstroke, one might conclude that following the man from Galilee was more like work than work had been, where at least you got paid. Out here in the mission field where they would fight for their ideals, even though as he would remind them later the harvest is plentiful but the laborers few, they found an endless and fast-moving stream of human needs to tend, human weaknesses to overcome, human sins to forgive, and human ignorance and unkindness to feel the sting of. Of all the bad things that stick to us like barnacles to sailing ships, or ticks to every known land mammal – including the armadillo, it turns out; plate armor isn't everything – willful ignorance may be the stickiest. We have an almost limitless capacity to replace what we wish were true for what is true, and to substitute what we want to believe for what we should accept and understand. Do we not witness this in our republic's life even to this day? From the mendacity of the Big Lie to the mythology of the Lost Cause to the desire in some quarters to ban attention the painful truths of this country's history of slavery and racism and its entanglements with oppression, the

sincere desire that things had been different, or the cynical gaslighting that insists that they really were, works devilishly hard to hold truth at bay, at with it both justice and mercy, the hard work of national healing and the blessings of honest, open reconciliation.

Many countries and people face this dilemma – or, when faced with it, buckle. Sometimes the choice of wishful belief over cold, hard facts is confused with faith, or honor, or even patriotism, but nothing good can ever follow from ignorance or lies, or from trusting in things that cannot be. Doing so is a form of idolatry, a chasing after false gods and other illusions. Faith must be in what is possible, even if it appears impossible – which is different from something actually being impossible. It is possible that I shall one day be as fit as a young man again, though I’ll admit that it is not likely. It’s impossible that I shall one day be young again. Likewise, it’s possible that on my next trip I’ll remember to bring everything I should for the journey. It’s not probable, but it is possible. It’s impossible for me to go back in time and remember to bring all I should’ve on the one I forgot things on.

The tl;dr on all this: learn from the past, honestly, and with what you learn, change the future before it gets here, for then it’s too late. Do all this in prayer, in lament, and in hope. As Lincoln once said, we must disentrall ourselves, and then we shall save ourselves and our country.

The Gradual Hymn set for today – this day, of all days, in our national life – does this with almost perfect pitch. Entitled, “O God of Earth and Altar,” it was written by the late 19th- early 20th century English writer and critic G.K. Chesterton – a giant in his own day, morally, intellectually, physically, and spiritually. The hymn cuts across the political divides of its time and of any time as an expert butcher cuts through a side of beef, separating section from section without hitting bone. The first verse laments before the God of earth and altar, in order: faltering leaders, a people threatened, wealth turned deadly, and scorn turned lethal, then asks that God to “take

away our pride.” Vanity, all is vanity. Spare us Lord, from our vain ambitions and deceits. The second verse furthers the prayer:

From all that terror teaches,
from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches
that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation
of honor, and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation,
deliver us, good Lord!

The ‘sleep’ there is metaphorical, as of a people who refuse to wake up, smell the coffee, and get on with solving the problems they all know are there. The damnation is all too real, as are the other evils from which Chesterton wrote, and we just sang, that the Lord should deliver us. We may well ask ourselves where terror and lies persist among us, and why, and where honor and service are profaned, and by whom. We may, and should, hear the sting in the rhyme of “terror teaches” with “easy speeches,” and of “profanation” with “damnation.” We may, and should, hear the doom tip-tapped in the alliteration “terror teaches” – all too often – and in “comfort cruel”. Why do the wicked prosper and lie at ease, go how many psalms and words of the prophets? I’ve lost count, but trust that the Lord has not, and would deliver us, perhaps by our own hands as he does in the stories of Esther and Judith, of Deborah and Miriam. As we are learning in our Sunday morning Bible study, these women in the Bible showed to the cruel terrors of their own day persons and a people steeled by faith in righteousness, honed by hope for peace and justice, and sharpened by both to pursue integrity and truth, and the survival of all their people, “prince and priest and thrall.” Their nation became what Chesterton hoped for: “a single sword to Thee,” Lord, raised not in might or self-service, for wealth or for power, but for freedom and for faith – that is, for all that is true, and all that it means, for integrity,

for hope, and for humility before a just and loving God who made us in his own image, though he soon enough regretted it.

Take nothing for the journey – except...all of that, and staff and sandals. The disciples left Jesus to go about their ministry weak as the world judges, but strong in the virtues that people need if they are to flourish and change the world for good. He bade them leave him without money or bread, knowing that their need and their goodness would sift the wheat from the chaff of their people, and of all people, from that time unto this. They would come to them bearing truth and in need – the two things people least like to see. How the people responded to that would be, Jesus knew, all they needed to know. *Amen.*