

November 26, 2107
Ezekiel 34:11-24
Matthew 25: 20-46
Rev. Chip Whitacre

On the narrow country highway that runs southeast from Richmond, Virginia to Williamsburg, Virginia is the Episcopal Parish of Westover. Lynne and I happened on the church several years ago as we took that backroad to Williamsburg. The first sign that there was a church was the ubiquitous “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” sign. Then there was an historical marker informing us that the church was established in 1624. Naturally, we stopped to have a look around.

Because the church was in an isolated location, we assumed it would be locked. But it wasn't. Inside, the church the walls were painted a pale yellow. All the woodwork was painted white. There were four large, arched windows, with clear glass in them, on each wall. It was a bright sunny day. The effect of all this was an explosion of light. I sometimes remember that scene this time of year as the days get shorter and darker. But there was something else. As we turned to leave we noticed that there was something over the exit doors. As we got closer we saw that it was a message. “You are entering the mission field” had been neatly penned by a calligrapher, framed and placed there as a reminder.

I often think about that reminder when I leave a church building. And I thought about that experience as I reflected on this last Sunday of Pentecost. Here we are poised to pass through the exit of one year on the church calendar. Preparing to enter into a new year filled with unknown challenges and opportunities. We have paused to give thanks for another year of bounty and grace. Now as we prepare to enter into a new year our mailboxes, both electronic and snail, are over filled with ads for those “must have” items that will make our Christmas complete. Thanksgiving has become the entrance to a season of consumerism that overwhelms everything else around it. I can't help but wonder how that affects our entry into the new church year?

As I reflected on this question, I was reminded of an editorial that I read some time ago. It was written by Peter Marty, the editor of the Christian Century and titled “Tourist and Traveler”. In it he reflects on one of Daniel Boorstin's books in which he talks about the difference between a tourist and a traveler. The word tourist comes from the Latin word *tornus*, which is a tool for making circles. Its literal meaning is “one who goes in circles”. Boorstin describes the tourist as passive, expecting things to happen. He or she is a sightseer. Tourism is a spectator sport full of contrived experiences. Peter Marty reflects on the tourist as someone who is largely unchanged by the experiences that they have. The tourist's circle is completed once back home sharing photos and mementos of the journey. The word traveler by contrast comes from the word *travail*, meaning work in general or more particularly trouble or torment. Boorstin describes the traveler as someone who is active. Someone in search of experiences that enlarge perspective. Peter Marty defines a traveler as someone who takes risks.

I think these images are good ones for us to reflect on as we prepare to step off into a new year. The liturgical calendar is conveniently, at least for this sermon, represented as a circle of seasons in their respective colors. It is a circle that we enter anew each year and traverse until we get back to the beginning once again. How we enter the circle and make the journey will inform how we arrive at journey's end. The question is, do we enter the circle as tourists or as travelers? Are we passive in our participation in the faith? Or are we willing to take the risks that might come with a more active engagement?

I think the readings for this morning may offer us an opportunity for deeper reflection on these questions. Ezekiel offers us some relief from the dark messages that we have heard in the last few weeks. There is at least some meager hope of redemption in his words. But judgment is still there. Behaviors that lie outside what God expects are noted. In the portion of the text that we didn't read this morning, God wonders why it isn't enough to feed on good pasture or drink the clear water without fouling it for those who will come later. In other words, take what you need, but leave it in good order for those who will come after you. And God will judge between the fat and the lean because the fat have pushed and butted the lean and weak aside. There is enough for everyone. You don't need to push others aside so you can overstuff yourself and disadvantage others. In the reading from Matthew, Jesus is more specific. There is still judgment and the punishment is for eternity.

The message in both these readings is a reminder of our individual responsibility to God's people. But to assume that responsibility and follow the path that Jesus puts before us requires us to take risks. It means we must risk changing the way we think about God. Too often we have a way of thinking about the world that is zero sum. It is as if whatever someone else receives diminishes in some way what is available for us. Therefore, we feel we must act to ensure that we have plenty. In those actions, we can and often do deprive others of enough. That is not God's way. God's way is the way of abundance and plenty for all. And what if we focus on only the promised judgment and punishment in these stories? In that case we can come to think about God just as the slave who hid the talent did. A harsh master, reaping where he does not sow and gathering where he does not scatter seed. That is not God's way either. If all we take away from these lessons is the fear of judgment, then we, like the slave who hid the talent, will not be living completely into God's promise.

But it is the risks that Jesus asks us to take that are most troubling. He is telling us that we must have direct encounters with others. People who are hungry or sick or don't look and sound like us. It is one thing to check our consumption so that others may have enough. Or to give from our abundance to a worthy cause. These are decisions or actions that we can do anonymously. But it is another thing altogether to come face-to-face with another person who is experiencing homelessness, or domestic abuse or who is desperately ill. Those are the troubling kinds of encounters in which we must be willing to step onto uncharted ground. They bring us face-to-face not only with the other and our fear of the unknown. But also with our own temptation to judge. That is why the risk is so great. Because it is in seeing ourselves and others honestly that we make the deepest connection to our shared humanity. Risky business indeed. But it is in those encounters that we will experience the deepest transformation of ourselves and others.

So, here we stand on the last Sunday of the church calendar. Thanksgiving is solidly behind us. Christmas is a glaring light of consumerism on the near horizon. And we are preparing to step across the threshold to the first Sunday in Advent. As we do we should remember the sign above the door and ask ourselves this question. In the coming year will we follow Christ as tourists or travelers? The answer to that question can make all the difference in the journey.

Amen.