

## “Arise and Come Away”

Mark 6:6b-13, 30-32

September 6, 2020

In a particularly exhausting season of seminary, while my husband and I were living in separate cities so I could complete my degree, we discovered that incredible live action Winnie the Pooh movie: Christopher Robin. Now if you haven't seen it yet, allow me to suggest it as a bit of homework. But I'm going to set it up for you a bit. Christopher Robin is no longer a boy but a grown man who is working far too much. He has a hard-pressing boss, Mr. Winslow, who tells him that he must work harder to save the suitcase company for which he works. At one point, after Robin asks to go away with his family on vacation, his boss says this to him: “Dreams don't come for free, Robin. Nothing comes from nothing...” So Robin's daughter and wife go away while he spends the long weekend working. But he isn't alone. Winnie the Pooh stumbles out of the Hundred Acre Woods and pays him a visit at his London flat. The two end up going on an adventure together as Robin works to balance his demands at work and his newfound need to return his old friend Pooh to his proper home. During their adventures Pooh tells Robin this: “Doing nothing often leads to the very best of something.”

Now, I recognize that it may be pastorally insensitive to say, “Doing nothing often leads to the very best of something” when some amongst us feel emotionally exhausted from “doing nothing.” Some are desperate for something to do. And for others doing nothing sounds like a distant fantasy as they're juggle homeschooling, job searching, caring for aging parents, and trying to remember to get the oil checked for that upcoming vacation that is now a socially distant camping trip.

In fact, exhaustion is so prevalent – whether it be from too much something or too much nothing – I recently saw another Presbyterian Minister polling

folks on the internet with this simple question: “How exhausted are you on a scale from 1-10.” Replies consisted of things like, “11,” “a billion” or, my favorite, “I'd say 10, but that requires hitting two keys. So, I'll just say 9.”<sup>i</sup>

In an article by the science journalist Tara Haelle entitled “Your Surge Capacity is Depleted – It's Why You Feel Awful,” she explained some of the potential reasons behind people feeling like a billion on this hyperbolic exhaustion scale. Haelle explains that in times of collective crisis, like say a natural disaster, we rely on our surge capacity to quickly and efficiently adapt in adverse situations. But it's called surge capacity for a reason. We can't constantly be surging. We have to rest and be replenished. This becomes difficult when we don't necessarily see a clear end in sight. Now many of us are explicitly or implicitly asking the question she articulates in this article: “How do you adjust to an ever-changing situation where the “new normal” is indefinite uncertainty?”<sup>ii</sup>

And I would add to her question – is it possible to not just adjust for the purpose of survival but to arise to this moment – individually and as the church – and to be transformed for the better? Might we find a way to navigate this indefinite uncertainty with faithfulness and hope? Well in this morning's Scripture I think we hear not a new way but an old way to do just that.

See, I pulled from Mark's gospel the sending of the disciples out for mission and their return but sandwiched between those two scenes is the beheading of John the Baptist. Mark uses the story of John's beheading to both signal the passage of time while the disciples are off on their ministerial adventure and to remind us, as the readers, that

the disciples are doing ministry in a time of fear, grief, and uncertainty. The Roman government and Herod are not cozying up to this Jesus person nor to his followers. No, they are afraid and grieving. In fact, before regathering to report on their missional adventures, the disciples heard their friend, John, had been killed, went and got his body, placed it in a tomb, and observed their proper rituals.

So how did Jesus invite them to adapt to their season of indefinite uncertainty? He sends them out two by two, with “nothing” but a staff, and tells them to receive and rely on the hospitality of others – no searching for nicer accommodations in town if things get weird – just show up, stay as long as they’ll have you, and no house-warming gifts allowed.

Taking nothing but a staff means that though they take no physical resources on their journey, they will carry with them the sign and authority of Christ’s guiding presence. Because our greatest mission in any season is to be equipped by our dependence on Christ and community. As disciples of Jesus, our mission in any season is to be equipped by our dependence on Christ and community. Not to be equipped by perfectly calm conditions for ministry, not to be equipped by flashy products or programs with which to share the Good News, not to be equipped with 8 hours of sleep and a can-do attitude. No, to be equipped by our dependence on Christ. Taking nothing for their journey but a deep awareness of the challenging times they are living in, they are open to meet their neighbors from a place of vulnerability, solidarity, humility, and gratitude. They are in a state of relying not only on Christ to provide but on the functional grace of strangers. They can’t rely on themselves, they have to look outward. Jesus is teaching them about the power of communities that nourish and challenge us.

He may send them with nothing into what they think is indefinite uncertainty but he is certain that they will be provided for by the kindness of others. From the very beginning, God has created something from nothing. And here, the disciples feeling of

empty-handedness creates the opportunity for a fullness that comes not from their having, hoarding, or carrying but from receiving the gift of community.

And that is a vital piece of Jesus’ instructions: they are to stay in the homes of others, receive the provision of strangers, even when – no especially when – conditions are not perfect. It would have delegitimized their faith and their mission if they left the home they had entered for a neighboring home that they found more comfortable or the conversation more palatable. So they stayed.

See there is an ancient way in which followers of Christ are asked not just to extend hospitality from our places of safety and power but to enter into unknown territory and humbly receive the welcome of others. The New Testament scholar, Joshua Jipp, writes about it this way: “One aspect of embodying the hospitality of God is through respecting and seeking to understand the cultural and religious protocols of our hosts.”<sup>iii</sup> This is mutuality. This is brave faith. This is finding something sacred where we naively anticipated nothing.

Standing at the precipice of my second year of ministry alongside you, here is what you’re teaching me: the mission to be a “welcoming community of faith where Jesus Christ transforms lives” is a circle. In the Christian life, and in our ecclesial life – that is our life as this corner of the Body of Christ - welcome and transformation, transformation and welcome, are inseparable. Our collective and our individual transformation cannot happen apart from the sacred practice of welcome. And when I say welcome I do not simply mean the faithful practice of greeting a new guest and inviting them into the community warmly.

No, when I say welcome, I also mean our capacity to be welcomed. Our capacity to go forward into an unknown future and trust in the kindness of strangers, to receive hospitality that surprises, challenges, and yes – even – transforms us. It is fairly comfortable for me, and I imagine many of us, to be the host: to control the menu, the guest list, the playlist, and the vibe. But what about when we are the guest?

What about when we feel ill equipped and when we haven't even brought flowers nor a bottle of wine to offer the host? What about when we show up late or with a different perspective or with a misunderstanding about the dress code? What then? That moment when we feel uncertain what to do with our hands and find ourselves staring down at the ground, embarrassed to lock eyes because we don't know the right words to say when we are met by grace and have nothing to give in return. That's hospitality too – being a gracious guest in conversations and communities that are new or challenging to us. Staying put in that hard conversation when there is a comfier bed and a more familiar culture down the street – that's hospitality too. Receiving the hospitality of another can get uncomfortable in that it will challenge and stretch us. It will make us more aware of our own vulnerability, our inadequacies, and our deep need for the kindness of strangers. And that can be our greatest offering: open palms, Christ's presence within and around you, and the humility to receive the other and be changed by them. That's welcome too.

I believe being welcomed is transformative because of you. The way you have welcomed me has changed my life and my faith. A couple months ago, I had the distinct pleasure of paying a visit to a long-time member and we shared home communion together. We were outside, socially distanced, and we were masked sparing the moments where we tucked a wafer or a splash of juice under them. It was my first-time pulling home communion from my bag and humbly saying those words, "Would you like to celebrate communion while I'm here?" It was also my first-time, and the last time, that I took communion in the physical presence of another human since Ash Wednesday. I was not well-versed on the practice, I had not undergone Home Communion training from the Deacons, but I knew my role so, on that sunny day in late July, I sanitized, placed out the elements in their wrapped containers, shared scripture and said the Words of Institution. And before I could assume the task, this saint of Second began praying. She had done Home Communion for others many times and

that day, as her guest in the outdoor garden of her home, she welcomed me to the table. By the end of our time, my mask was wet with tears and after months of strange, disembodied, grief-filled ministry – I remembered why this calling is such a gift. Saints of Second, you remind me regularly why Jesus sent the disciples in pairs, why ministry is more about bearing witness to the holy than it ever is about showing up perfectly or avoiding conflict or saying the right words.

And so I believe, because I see you practicing it, that we can arise to this moment of indefinite uncertainty to practice transformative welcome. We can learn from one another, find God's face within one another, and drive out any demons who would demonize or dehumanize another. And lest we, for even a moment, begin tallying off people set right or proven wrong along the way, Jesus will stop us right there. And like he did for the Apostles, he will invite us to come away from such talk. We will not hear accolades for our long list of accomplishments but these simple words: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile."

Obsessing over accomplishments and solution-oriented thinking are not going to serve us well in this indefinite uncertainty. It would not have served the Apostles well either as they took their vague instruction manuals and hit the road. It would not have served them because it is no way to approach great mystery nor is it any way to approach another human. People are not things to be fixed. Problems to be solved. Subjects to be conquered. People are not numbers nor are they expendable. People, like the Triune God we are fashioned after are complex, diverse, beautiful, full of ambiguity, and each of us – you, your neighbor, your enemy, and each stranger on the internet – bears the image of Christ. And in committed community with those souls, we can find something better than a solution, we can discover collective transformation.

Yes, when the Apostles return home to Jesus and try to begin speaking of all *they* accomplished – Jesus redirects them to a time of rest and reflection. Because

when we come away from such talk we can remember our dependence on Christ and our desperate need for imperfect community.

Yes, Jesus tells them to come away and sit, in this deserted place, with the uncomfortable and transformative reality of the Kingdom of God: we never rise alone.

We will always and only rise together. When we face ambiguous seasons in our collective story: we are facing them together. When we walk into an unknown future: we are walking together. When we grieve and cry out to God: we are lifting our voices together, perhaps in a cacophony of perspectives, but together none the less. When we worship spread out across the nation and world or with masks and physically distanced: we are met by a God of great mystery who holds us all together and has sent us to depend upon one another.

So the next time we are quick to think that another person has nothing to offer, or that the season ahead is a barren land of nothingness, or that there is nothing you can offer to the generous host. Come away from such thoughts. Come away to the deserted place and discover a broader imagination rooted in the very real presence of Jesus Christ who knows what we too often forget: we never rise alone. Our collective future requires our full dependence on Christ and each other. And, in fact, we need nothing else for the journey.

Because together we can discover what has been true about God since the dawn of creation: the very best somethings come from what we perceive as nothing. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> “Elizabeth Hagan (@elizabethagan) / Twitter,” Twitter, accessed September 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/elizabethagan>.

<sup>ii</sup> Tara Haelle, “Your ‘Surge Capacity’ Is Depleted — It’s Why You Feel Awful,” Medium, August 17, 2020, <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c>.

<sup>iii</sup> Joshua W. Jipp and Christine D. Pohl, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Eerdmans, 2017), 117.