

Sermon
3 Pentecost—Proper 8-C
St. Andrew's—Last Sermon
June 26, 2022
William Bradbury

1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21
Psalm 16
Galatians 5:1,13-25
Luke 9:51-62

Today is the end of two years as your bridge priest. I am deeply grateful for the privilege I've had of proclaiming with you the Realm of God during this time of Covid pandemic, racial injustice, and political upheaval.

But now that we're coming to the end of our work together, the gospel reading is most fitting.

Jesus is only 30 years old but he knows his death is just around the corner. Earlier in Luke 9 Jesus says: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised."

Here's a question: If we learn that we will soon be dying, what will we do?

Will we get our affairs in order, so those left behind will know our wishes regarding the funeral and burial, as well as where to find our life insurance and bank records?

Will we work on cleaning up our past: making amends for the ways we have hurt others? Certainly, it would be a good time to make peace with those we love.

Or will we forget all that morbid stuff and take the trip of our dreams to Paris or the South Seas?

All of these plans make sense, but we'll need to remember boxer Mike Tyson's famous wisdom: **"Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."**

But since Jesus is our guide, what does Jesus do when he knows his end is near?

"When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

Jesus doesn't look back but rather he looks forward.

And he encourages those who want to follow him to do the same thing, because the Realm of God, which is **the experience of the Living and Life-Giving God—Life in the Spirit—is not found in rooting around in the past.**

As I said recently, many are tempted to spend their lives in the stern of the ship of life facing backwards. They imagine that if they can feel their emotions deeply enough, they can change the past.

Maybe if I can experience frozen regret over things I've done, and if I can experience constant guilt, shame, or anger about my past then the past will magically change and I'll feel better.

But we have evidence that **all this does is make the past an even bigger weight that we have to drag around through our daily lives.**

It's why I think it best to consign our past to the mercy of God.

I said several weeks ago that in the movie "Titanic" young 17-year-old Rose climbs over the stern railing in order to jump into the frigid waters of the North Atlantic to end her life. She can't imagine a life free from the past demands of her callous finance and controlling mother. It's better to end her young life than to have this pain keep repeating for the next 70 years.

But Jesus teaches that looking backwards is the wrong strategy if we would experience the transformation of the Realm of God.

The right strategy, Jesus says, is "Follow me."

But the man replies, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus says to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Another says, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, **"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."**

But isn't the past where our identity is? Isn't it in the past that all the great things that have happened to us have happened?

Most parents would tell you that if they could go back in time, they'd choose to go back to when their kids were little. When my Katie and Andy were 10 and 8, life was fantastic—my church was thriving, I was coaching my kids' soccer teams, and all was right with the world.

Of course, none of those things I cherish now happened in the past. When they happened, they happened in the present, the present where God is breaking in from the future, offering novelty and transformation. Living this way children help us leave behind the prison of

the past. New Life, New Creation, is found in the bow looking forward, with hearts open to God and neighbor.

Jack, the Christ figure in "Titanic", invites Rose to join him in the bow where she can lift her arms in welcome to whatever God brings.

Jesus leaves his home in Galilee and sets his face toward Jerusalem, where he will "stretch out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross", so that we may know that God's love is stronger than all the sins and trauma of this violent world, and, yes, even stronger than death.

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Apostle Paul teaches the Galatians the same thing, when he tells them, "**You** are led by the Spirit..." But notice here that that "**you**" is not singular but plural: in my language it reads, "**y'all** are led by the Spirit."

He's talking to the whole church. Therefore, imagine now that instead of Rose climbing over the stern railing to end her life, it is Saint Andrew's Church climbing over the railing. Imagine St. Andrew's looking backwards so long that y'all can't imagine a new future.

But then y'all hear a voice of great affection and encouragement that lures y'all to the bow where you spread your arms, open your heart, and embrace in each moment the future in the Spirit.

There may be rough seas, even icebergs ahead, but no matter, for the parish is grasped by Christ who never, ever, lets us go and fills us with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And there will be temptations: In three weeks, Eleanor Prior, your Priest in Charge arrives and y'all will be tempted to use Eleanor, not as a priest who leads but as a chaplain, even a hospice chaplain, who holds your hand as life ebbs away.

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But you will resist this temptation, as people and priest together welcome new visions and new ministries—**scary, exhausting, and exhilarating—that make visible the love of Christ.**

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This is Life in the Spirit. **The Day of Pentecost, then and now, is God's answer to every human attempt to turn churches into museums, clergy into chaplains, and God into a pet.**

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So, Jesus gets the last word: **"Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, Saint Andrew's, go and proclaim the Realm of God."**