

“Escape”
John 17:6-19
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The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

Are you taking a vacation this summer? Are you going to go somewhere? How much vacation time do you get from your work? Did you know that “vacation” is a relatively recent idea? Certainly most of the founders of our country would have found the idea strange. In Puritan America, taking time on Sunday to rest and to worship was mandatory, but if one took more days off from work than that, well that was considered just lazy. People didn’t stop work and do nothing. And they certainly didn’t travel anywhere for the enjoyment of it. After all, the word “travel” comes from the same word as “travail,” to go somewhere, outside of your home or your town was not only difficult, but often dangerous. In early America, travel was hard and vacations were unknown. Then, in the spring of 1869, a handsome young preacher from Boston named William H.H. Murray published one of the first guidebooks to a wilderness area. In describing the Adirondack Mountains—a 9,000-square-mile expanse of lakes, forests and rivers in upstate New York—Murray broached the then-outrageous idea that an excursion into raw nature could actually be pleasurable. Before that date, most Americans considered the country’s primeval landscapes only as obstacles to be conquered. But Murray’s self-help opus, *Adventures in the Wilderness; or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks*, suggested that hiking, canoeing and fishing in unsullied nature were the ultimate health tonic for harried city dwellers whose constitutions were weakened by the demands of civilized life.

In 1869, after the horrors of the Civil War and amid the country’s rapid industrialization, Murray’s book became a surprise best seller. Readers were enthralled by his vision of a pure, Edenic world in the Adirondacks, where hundreds of forest-swathed lakes were gleaming “like gems...amid the folds of emerald-colored velvet.” Murray argued that American cities were disease-ridden and filled with pressures that created “an intense, unnatural and often fatal tension” in their unhappy denizens. The wilderness, by contrast, restored both the spirit and body. “No axe has sounded along its mountainsides,

or echoed across its peaceful waters,” Murray enthused, so “the spruce, hemlock, balsam and pine...yield upon the air, and especially at night, all their curative qualities.” What’s more, Murray pointed out, a new train line that had opened the year before meant this magical world was only 36 hours’ travel from New York City or Boston. The vision struck a deep chord, and his book ran into ten editions within four months.¹ The word “vacation” began to come into use, because people began to “vacate” their homes while they took to the wilderness.

Europeans had embraced this concept long before but did not use the word “vacation” but rather said that they were going on “holiday.” As you might expect, holiday comes from the English “holy day” because in the original way of looking at it, people did not take time off from work to relax or treat themselves, but if one was going to leave home it was to make a pilgrimage to a holy place, there was a spiritual purpose. To escape from daily life and to get closer to God. From the beginning of Christianity there has been a desire to find a better place, to escape from the world around us with its temptations, troubles, and cares. As Jesus prayed in the passage we read, “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.”

Is that true, do you think? Do we belong to the world? Are we physical beings who are part of God’s good creation and so are tied to this physical realm? Or are we spiritual beings, inhabiting a body for a while, but looking forward to the day when we leave all the physical limitations behind? When we sing hymns here in church, do we sing “This is My Father’s World” or do we sing “This World is Not My Home?” For thousands of years, many Christians have believed that the world is something that we must try to escape. This goes back to the very early years of the Christian Church when some of the early believers, in order avoid the occasional persecution of Christians by the Romans Empire and also to avoid the possibility of taxation began to move away from established society. Some of these moved out into the desert to live by themselves and became hermits, living for years and years without other human contact. A few stayed in the cities, but tried to show they did not belong to the world in

¹ Smithsonian Magazine, April 2013. Tony Perrottet.

interesting ways. Some would stay standing day and night or eat no cooked food for years on end. One of the early city hermits was Simeon Stylites. He built a pillar some sixty feet high and with a basket on top that resembled a basket we might see under a hot air balloon, Simeon lived on top of that pillar for forty years, never coming down to be sullied by worldly things. Others moved out into the desert but stayed together and formed communities, groups that lived apart from society, but who worked and formed a community. These were the first monasteries. There was tension between these two ideas. As Christians are we supposed to withdraw from the world like hermits? Or are we to form communities to care for each other?

When I went to Scotland in 2009 it was to visit one of the great monasteries in Christian history, the Abbey on the island of Iona, in the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. It is not easy to get there. One flies into Glasgow and then takes a train to the city of Oban. At Oban you have to get on a Ferry that will take you to Craignure on the island of Mull. There you get on a bus that takes you across the length of the island to Fionnafort, where you get on another ferry that takes you across the sound finally to Iona. When you reach there you realize there are no cars allowed on the island and so to finally get to the Abbey, you have to walk. Planes, trains, buses, boats, feet. I remember thinking to myself that this place is really isolated, really off the beaten path. But that's not really true. I was thinking in 21st century terms. In the sixth century, when Iona was founded, it was exactly on the beaten path. Because in those days, if people had to travel, from Ireland or along the west coast of Scotland, there were no roads. You would go by boat. And all the boats would be sailing past Iona. Everyone passing by would see the abbey at Iona.

When I first visited the Abbey church in Iona, the guide pointed out to me that as you walk in through the old stone walls there is a side stair to the left side that goes up to an observation post, a place where a monk would be stationed to watch day and night. When I saw it, I first assumed that the monk was there watching for danger, approaching thieves or armies, but then I was told that it was to watch for guests. This was a monastery of course, a place that was separate from the world, but it was also a

guest house, a place where anyone, especially the poor travelers were made welcome. It was part of the world but trying to live as a colony of heaven. Hospitality was an obligation of the Christian community.

That's really the difficult calling for the Christian church. Are we part of the world or are we part of heaven? Of course the answer is yes. We are both. If you read farther in Jesus' prayer, you read the words "as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." The world is where we are supposed to be. We are part of it. But we are also part of heaven, of the kingdom of God. And we are to live like this is an outpost of God's kingdom. That hospitality was something that my mother taught me. When I came home from college my mother was living in her house without all of us kids around. But she had all these empty bedrooms. So when I came home for the summer, I never knew who might be staying with us. An Englishman who was without a job. Two Swedish girls who were traveling around the US who happened to get on the wrong bus. A friend of hers who needed a place for a couple of weeks before she could move into her new apartment. Her home was open to those in need. That's always been my example for the church as well. We are open to everyone. We look forward to heaven but here and now can be the beginnings of heaven—but only if it is a safe and welcoming place for all. Isn't that what our view of God's kingdom is? Safe from any hurt or problem and open to all who love. The kind of place we never want to take a vacation from. The kind of place we would want to escape to, except it doesn't take an escape, it takes building it here and now.

Together.