

The Second Sunday of Advent, Year C
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
December 5, 2021
Malachi 3:1-4
Canticle 4
Phillipians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

Divesting for the Wilderness

Last week, on the first Sunday of Advent, I recounted an historic non-event, the Great Disappointment of 1844.

Today I will tell you about the Franklin expedition of 1845.

At this rate of one year per Sunday sermon, it will take a little over 3.3 years of Sundays to get us caught up to the year 2021. And then, of course, we'll still be a little behind. I'm not gonna do that. Meanwhile... 1845.

In 1845 the Franklin expedition set out to find the northwest passage and the North Pole.

One of my favorite authors, Annie Dillard, recounts this expedition in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. In the longest essay of the book, entitled "An Expedition to the Pole," she describes the Franklin expedition this way:

In 1845, Sir John Franklin and 138 officers and men embarked from England to find the northwest passage across the high Canadian Arctic to the Pacific Ocean. They sailed in two three-masted barques. Each sailing vessel carried an auxiliary steam engine and a twelve-day supply of coal for the entire projected two or three years' voyage. Instead of additional coal, ... each ship made room for a 1,200-volume library, "a hand-organ playing fifty tunes," china place settings for officers and men, cut-glass wine goblets, and sterling silver flatware. The officers' sterling silver knives, forks, and spoons were particularly interesting. The silver was of ornate Victorian design, very heavy at the handles and richly patterned. Engraved on the handles were the individual officers' initials and family crests. The expedition carried no special clothing for the Arctic, only the uniforms of Her Majesty's Navy.

The expedition set off with great fanfare. Two months after they set out, a British whaling captain met them at sea. Upon his return to England, he reported that everything was going well and the expedition's members were in great spirits. The whaling captain was the last European to see any of them alive.

Reading directly from Annie Dillard again:

Years later, civilization learned that many groups of Inuit—Eskimos—had [come] across...various still-living or dead members of the Franklin expedition. Some had glimpsed, for instance, men pushing and pulling a wooden boat across the ice. Some had found, at a place called Starvation Cove, this boat, or a similar one, and the remains of the thirty-five men who had been dragging it. At Terror Bay the Inuit found a tent on the ice, and in it thirty bodies. At Simpson Strait some Inuit had seen a very odd sight: the pack ice pierced by the three protruding wooden masts of a barque.

For twenty years, search parties recovered skeletons from all over the frozen sea. Franklin himself—it was learned after twelve years—had died aboard ship.

So, it seems that after Sir John Franklin died aboard ship, and the ships were frozen in place in the ice, the remaining officers and men decided to walk to help across the ice. They chose different things from the remaining supplies on the two ships to take with them. And, over the years, their remains were found with the things they had chosen to carry.

A group of frozen bodies were found with place settings of that very heavy sterling silver flatware engraved with officers' initials and family crests.

Two bodies were found in a boat that they had dragged sixty-five miles; with them were, as Annie Dillard notes, "some chocolate, some guns, some tea, and a great deal of table silver."

Nobody survived the Franklin expedition. Later European expeditions to both the North and South Poles that were successful succeeded in no small part because the European visitors consulted with and learned from and traveled with the indigenous Inuit; people who knew where they were, and they traveled like them by dogsleds.

It's perhaps easy from our vantage point to make judgments about the choices of the members of the Franklin expedition.

What were they thinking? Why not take more than twelve days' worth of coal? Why not take appropriate clothing? Why keep carrying heavy monogrammed silver—especially after there was nothing left to eat with it?

Maybe they thought they could trade the silver, something they clearly valued, to people they might encounter who could help them. Maybe they intended to pay for assistance with table silver. We can wonder, but so far, no evidence has been discovered that would let us, in fact, know what was in their minds.

Why keep carrying heavy things that no longer serve? It's a good question for us. We and the entire globe are on a kind of expedition to a post-pandemic world. Like the members of the Franklin expedition in the Arctic, none of us has ever been before to the place where we are headed. We don't know where we are exactly.

Is there something you've been carrying around a very long time that you need to let go of?

Something that, whether material or physical or psychological or emotional or spiritual or relational, adds unnecessary weight as you journey with God through this life?

Something or maybe more than one thing that was given to you or passed down to you or imposed on you by someone you love? Something you feel you have an obligation somehow to keep carrying, keep hauling around, keep dragging across the ice?

These are good questions for the congregation of St Paul's and the whole Church as well as for us as individual members of the Body of Christ. We cannot keep adding on more and more and more. What do we need to carry forward, and what do we need to let go? In the words of composer Gustav Mahler, "Tradition is not to preserve the ashes but to pass on the fire."

Advent offers us the countercultural gift of space and time to evaluate and take inventory. It is a season, an attitude, a space as well as a time to clear out and make room—again, anew—for the most important things. And this inventory includes remembering that the most important things are not things but relationships and people and values. Not stuff. Not even heirloom monogrammed silver.

Maybe the clearing out we need to do and the preparation for Christ's coming at Christmas that we need to make is slowing down and letting our busy minds and bodies rest. How do you do that?

One way I do that is on the water. Friday is my sabbath. Nearly every Friday morning I am in my kayak on the water. Usually, for part of the time I am paddling among friends, and part of the time I am paddling solo. Community and solitude. It's restorative for me. It helps me slow down. I *need* to slow down and just be every day, not just on my day off. I need, we human beings need, at least a little sabbath rest every day.

Advent calls us to renew our commitment to getting that rest and to be renewed by that rest. Could we go to bed a little earlier and sleep a little longer? Could we put our screens aside just a little sooner each night?

As we journey on our expedition to a post-pandemic world, we are in some ways traversing a wilderness. Not a wilderness of cold and ice like the Franklin expedition. But into a world that has not yet been fully signposted. Sometimes we likely will not know exactly where we are. Yet God is still with us and always coming to us and coming alongside us. And in wilderness spaces we often open to newness, to renewal, to possibilities we could not see before.

It's what happened to John the Baptizer in our gospel today.

It's easy to get this backwards, to think that John received a word from God and then went into the wilderness.

But that's not what Luke says. Rather, he says, John was in the wilderness. And, having given up stability and creature comforts, having left home, God's word comes to him.

Luke's gospel is the only one that refers to John the Baptizer as the son of Zachariah. This is significant.

John was the child of Zachariah and Elizabeth (Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary). Zachariah and Elizabeth were people of the priestly class of Judaism. In the first century, that priestly association was an indicator of higher status than that of many others. So, growing up, John's standard of living likely would have been higher than that of many others.

He is a child of privilege, and he is in the wilderness.

He has let go of his status in the city and the system, given up a more comfortable life, and gone to the middle of nowhere, someplace mostly without signposts where he has never been before.

And there, in the wilderness, is where God inspires him to begin a preaching mission, calling people to repentance. His becomes the voice crying in the wilderness as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

We learn elsewhere that he was clothed in camel's hair and eating whatever he found: locusts and wild honey. It seems he's taken only himself into the wilderness. There is not a piece of table silver to be found on him.

Why did he go to the wilderness? What inspired him to do that? To go against expectations and against type?

Maybe he had to unencumber himself in order to be able to listen to God's voice. Maybe God was speaking to him for years, but he had to divest himself of privilege in order to hear it. Maybe he had to become a little less comfortable in order to receive a challenging but comforting word. The voice in the wilderness is first God's and then John's.

What do we need to stop carrying? What do we need to do—or not do—so we can slow down and rest and make room? Where do we need to place ourselves so we can hear and listen to God's voice?

The point of the Advent season for us is summed up in the collect for the fourth Sunday of Advent, two weeks from today. The point is that when Jesus Christ comes—as a baby once more, as our Sovereign at the end of the age, and over and over in the Eucharist and as the stranger and the guest—that he will find in us a mansion prepared for himself.

“People, look East, and sing today; Love the gift is on the way.” Prepare the way.