
A Spirit of Adventure

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The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 14 - Year C

Earlier this summer, Sally and I took our seven-year-old grandson to Montana. I must admit that I was a little anxious. Two weeks is a long time. What if Quinn decided that he wanted to go home half-way through the trip?

My fears faded fast, though.

Our first stop was Glacier National Park. Quinn and I took a ranger-led hike up to Avalanche Falls. There are, predictably, lots of rocks in Glacier and there were lots of rocks on this hike. Our ranger wanted us to see each and every specimen! I was starting to feel like I might already know all I needed to know about rocks.

About a third of the way through the hike, we stopped to look at the argillite that had washed down the creek from the falls. The smooth stones were beautiful, some red and others green -- depending on whether the iron in them had oxidized.

To make sure that we would remember how to pronounce the name of the rocks, our ranger pretended to be a pirate, growling out the first syllable as she threw a sweeping undercut with her fist - "aarjelight!"

That was it. We had our code. For the rest of the trip, whenever a show of male solidarity was needed - in the grocery store, at the baseball game, or fording a creek - Quinn would turn to me, pump his fist and with a big smile, say "Papa George , aarjelight!"

Sally commented more than once that it really was interesting to be traveling with not one, but two seven-year-olds.

By the end of the trip, we had finally worn Quinn out. He looked at me one afternoon, as I woke him up from his nap, and said "Papa George , I'm done." He was ready to go home. He was missing his family.

To get back to Atlanta, though, we had to fly through Minneapolis-St. Paul. When we checked in, we learned that our flight to Minneapolis had been delayed by almost two hours. We only had a one hour layover. So, it looked like we wouldn't even get to Minneapolis until after our flight to Atlanta had already left. And, there weren't any other options. It was the last flight out.

"No problem," I proclaimed. "It's an adventure. If we have to spend the night, we'll have a great time. I have some friends there. We'll stay in a cool place. Maybe the Twins are in town."

Quinn was not immediately persuaded. It took his Grandmother to quiet his protests. She's particularly good at that sort of thing.

After Quinn and I had played our 43rd game of Go Fish on the plane, the captain's voice came over the intercom. He said that we had made up time in the air and would be landing in thirty minutes. As we put away our cards and turned off the video game, I looked at my watch. "Do you think we'll make it?" Quinn asked. "We might," I said, "but it's going to be close. We'll have to run."

Quinn was quiet until the plane landed. Then, as we were taxiing to the gate, he leaned over and with the now familiar conspiratorial grin on his face, said, "Papa George ... Let's don't even try to make the plane. Let's just stay here and have some fun."

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, , Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit ,. You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." (Luke 12:32, 36, 40)

Jesus is announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Scholars have debated over the years whether Jesus and the early Christians really thought that the end was near. Sometimes the texts say that the Kingdom is coming. Sometimes they say that it is already here.

I think that the debate over when the Kingdom is coming overlooks the more important question of what it is.

Jesus is telling the story of Israel. It is a story rich with meaning and purpose. He is bringing the drama to an end. But, in this case, it's not the end in the sense that the story is over. It's not intended to be the last chapter. It's the end in the sense that it's the goal and purpose of the story. This is what the story is about.

The end is, in fact, a new beginning.

The announcement of the coming of the Kingdom of God is a claim about the providence of God -- how God rules. Jesus is making the announcement because God's rule is being established through his life, death, and resurrection. The kingdom is present, then, to the extent that Jesus' life reveals the effective power of God to create a transformed people.

Now, I realize that, for some, this doesn't sound like such good news. Talking about the coming of the Kingdom makes them anxious. It sounds to them like a day of comprehensive licensing exams - a day of checking beliefs, evaluating doctrines, and scoring religious experiences. And, perhaps most frightening, a day that ends with the sorting of the sheep from the goats.

This kind of anxiety can leave us feeling like the ground squirrels that Quinn chased all over Yellowstone National Park. They were nervous creatures, frantically racing from under the cabin porch to a near-by rock, and then back again. Their survival seemed to depend on staying away from everything that moved. They saw the light, but they didn't get to stay in it very long.

I think that Jesus is making a different kind of announcement. I don't think that he's demanding that we take a test, as much as he is inviting us to join him on a journey. I think he is inviting us to participate with him in an adventure. He is promising us that we will find our true life by imitating him - not to be Jesus, but to be like him by doing what he did in the way that he did it.

If you think about it, there isn't really any need for a test. Jesus is already aware of our failures. He already knows our weaknesses. He already realizes that we don't know all of the answers. We don't even know what questions to ask most of the time.

There is no need to be afraid. Jesus doesn't need for us to be perfect. We don't always have to feel like a Christian. We don't always have to act like a Christian. We don't even always have to believe like a Christian. That's the point of community. On the days we don't, we depend on others who do.

The truth is that Jesus chose us for this journey long before we even knew there was a journey to take.

Jesus does need something from us, though. He needs for us to be faithful. Or, to borrow his words, he needs for us to be "ready." He needs for us to be dressed for action, and for our lamps to be lit.

To be ready, I think, we need to develop a spirit of adventure. The journey will be dangerous. We can't always protect ourselves from harm. The journey will be frustrating. We won't always know where we are going until after we get there. We won't always know why we are doing something until after we have done it. And, we will be vulnerable. We will have to give up our autonomy to find ourselves.

I have always thought that Christopher Columbus is wonderful example of this spirit of adventure. He lived in a medieval Europe that seemed trapped in an imaginative gridlock. It faced a seemingly intractable problem. People desperately wanted to get to the Orient, and the riches they thought it offered. But, the Moors stood in the way.

Yet, in the face of this anxiety, Columbus stepped out of the crowd and found a new way. He is reported to have had one of the finest libraries of his time, but he didn't just sit there looking for new answers to the same old questions. He asked a new question. If the world is round, then why not go west to get east?

And he found new ways of doing things. Others had taken a northern route to make sure that they could use the strong winds there to get home. Columbus took a southern route so that he didn't have to sail into those winds on the way out. He had to hope that he could find them when it was time to turn around.

Columbus had the nerve to embark on a journey into the unknown, and the sense of adventure to see it through. He literally threw caution to the winds and, in doing so, changed the world as he knew it. He discovered something that he never anticipated, a land mass between Europe and Asia. It would be almost three centuries before the Europeans realized that what they had found was more valuable than what they were looking for originally.

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Jesus is announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God.

He is talking about the power of God to create new life and our ability to live into it by imitating Jesus - not by being Jesus, but by being like him. We don't need to be afraid. Our weaknesses are already known. We don't have to be perfect. There are others who will be perfect for us on the days when we aren't.

It's not about death, you see. It's about life.

It's not about being right. It's about being in relationship.

It's not about survival. It's about transformation.

The journey will require something of us, though. We will need to be faithful. We will need to have a sense of adventure.

When we finally got back to Atlanta, and got to the top of the escalator outside of baggage claim, Quinn ran to meet his Dad. I felt a pang of sadness as I realized that my trip with Quinn was coming to an end.

When his Dad went to get our bags, Quinn walked over to me with a serious look on his face. "Papa George," he said. "You know I was just kidding when I said that I didn't want to catch the plane and see my Dad."

"I know," I said. "But, you weren't kidding when you said that you were going to have fun if we had to spend the night in Minneapolis. You weren't kidding when you decided you would act like we were on an adventure even if you couldn't see your Dad."

As I think back on our flight home, I realize that while I was the one calling it an adventure, Quinn was the one who was willing to treat it like it really was an adventure. I knew how I was supposed to feel. He was the one who found the nerve to feel that way.

I wonder. Maybe that's what Jesus meant when he said that "whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (Mark 10:15)

You may be interested to know:

"¢ My description of the Kingdom of God (the problem with scholarly arguments over time, the character of its presence, the image of Jesus' announcement as an invitation to join him on a journey, an adventure, and the definition of imitating Jesus) is taken from Stanley Hauerwas. He addresses this concept, among other places, in *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) on pages 81 to 87, and on page 93.

"¢ My claim that to be a Christian doesn't always require us to feel, act, or believe like a Christian is taken from Hauerwas and William Willimon. They say this more eloquently in their meditation on "Our Father" in *Lord Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), beginning on page 25.

"¢ The example of Christopher Columbus (including the characterization of his importance to the development of fifteenth century Europe) comes from Edwin H. Friedman. He uses the spirit of adventure that he sees in Columbus as an example of leadership in *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York, NY: The Church Publishing, Inc., 2007) on pages 190 to 194.

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