



Travel Light

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
12 November 2017

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

I flew home from Houston yesterday. Three more days of meetings to prepare for the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering. In June, we will welcome almost 30,000 high school students, youth directors, adult leaders, pastors, and bishops to 5 days of worship and service and faith formation to the glory of God. It sounds good. It is also a daunting task – one that takes almost three years of planning and preparing. We are now less than 227 days from opening night. Which means that I still have a fair amount of work to do. But the youth gathering is my side job. My real job is here with you. Which means that when I travel, I always celebrate a homecoming. Yesterday – it was time to come home. The meetings were scheduled to end at noon – but my flight was scheduled for 12:10pm. Which meant I got to take my first Uber yesterday. If you know Uber – great. If you do not – well, Uber is the company name for a loosely connected group of people who allow themselves and their cars to be summoned to your location by an app on your smartphone. A smartphone taxi service. I called one to my hotel. Another colleague who also had an early flight – shared the ride. At the airport, we dropped off my colleague first. And as I was being dropped off, I realized that my friend had left his bag in the trunk of the Uber. I called my friend and told him that I would take his bag home and then ship it to his home in Oregon. He was thrilled to not leave the bag behind and I was able to help out my friend. So far. So good.

Now I want to point out to you before we go any farther – I am a careful traveler. Well-prepared. And yet we all have moments when, regardless of our preparation, we stumble. In the airport, I realized I had one too many carryon bags and so I checked my largest carryon. I entered the TSA security line. I showed my ID. I scanned my electronic ticket. The TSA agent told me that there was only one line – so I needed to show my electronic ticket to confirm my pre-check status so as to not take off my shoes etc. Fine.



Travel Light

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
12 November 2017

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Great. And that is when it happened. Waiting to lay my bags on the conveyor belt to go through the x-ray machine, the TSA agent asked if the bags on the belt were mine. To which I replied. Yes, the first one is mine. The second one someone gave to me. Wait. What? Oh. My. God. You know that moment when you say something and recognize instantly that it was the wrong thing to say. “The bag?” “Yes, it is my friend’s bag. No, he is not traveling on the flight. I am taking it for him. Yes, I know him.” And now I have three TSA new friends right by my side. Then they take the bag. “Can you tell me what is in the bag?” “No, I have not opened the bag.” “How long have you known your friend?” “Why are you in Houston?” “Can you come with us?” “Sure!” “We are going to swab your hands.” “OK.” And how about a pat down to wrap up our time together. Needless to say, security at the George Bush Intercontinental Airport is really well prepared. I think it is fair to say – yesterday – I was not.

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids^[a] took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.^[b] ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids^[c] got up and trimmed their lamps.” The five wise bridesmaids were prepared. They expected the bridegroom to return – even though they did not know when he would arrive – they kept vigil. In the Old Testament God presents God’s self as husband to God’s people. In the New Testament, Jesus is the bridegroom of the Church. That all the bridesmaids were asleep when the bridegroom arrived does not matter. A reminder to us that Jesus will come, when God determines the time is right. It will not matter what we are doing. Whatever it is, we must be doing it in such a way that we don’t have to “make things right” (get more oil) when Jesus comes. A testament to being well prepared. And yet, I realize in this life, one can never be fully prepared. It does



Travel Light

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
12 November 2017

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

not matter the number of twists and turns for which you plan, this life we live comes as it does. As I have said before, God does not send the events of this life to us but God does, indeed, allow them to happen. And for that my friends, we can only bring so much oil with us on the journey in order to keep our lamps lit.

Last week, my friend asked me to go see her mom. I expected to enter the hospital room of a woman weak and fragile. Instead I met a woman, who could barely contain her energy. In 45 minutes I could only get a brief reply to questions that were asked and answered by the woman lying in the hospital bed. Finally, I interrupted the woman long enough to ask if I could pray. The woman quieted to a whisper and I held her hand and the hand of her daughter and I closed my eyes and asked God for healing and tending. When I started the Lord's prayer – the mom and daughter joined me word for word. And there God revealed God's self in that hospital room. I am not always patient enough to wait for God to arrive.

God knows, I usually do my most honest begging for God to show up when I have found myself the most unprepared. The emergency room. The lakeshore. The bedside. The front porch of a house. The funeral home. The text message that tells me far more is going on than a simple, "could you pray for?" Around the table in my office. This pulpit. When I am invited into such moments to bring you a word of peace –a reminder of God's promise – I am constantly reminded that I am never able to bring enough oil to light our lamps surrounded by the darkness of death. It turns out that, in the end, only Jesus can fill us completely. Only Jesus will chase away our darkness. Only Jesus will break the chains that hold us back. Only Jesus will breathe life into our dust. Only Jesus will offer the living water our dry souls long for. No matter how much we have prepared...only Jesus will fill us completely. I believe that our preparations are far less about what we carry with us and far more about where we keep our eyes focused. Maybe the story Jesus tells us today



Travel Light

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
12 November 2017

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

is more about keeping our eyes on the One who calls us by name than keeping our bags packed for the journey.

It seems to me that yesterday I should have kept my eyes on the TSA rules. Do not take a bag from someone you do not know. And if you take a bag for a friend, do not tell the TSA agents the bag is not yours. What is the nugget you should take away from this sermon today? Travel light! Leave your baggage behind and keep your eyes on the prize. My friends the prize is Jesus.

Most days, I believe we often do the very best we can. Most days I am glad to be able to give thanks to God for the sunrise before me and the love that surrounds me. And yet, I am well aware that even on my best days I can struggle and that there are days I am simply not prepared for what the world brings to my doorstep or the power of death leaves me in its wake. There are days when I cannot let go of what I am carrying believing it far too important to leave behind— when even as I keep my eyes on Jesus – I am lost for a moment of God’s light in the darkness. And that is when I am reminded that only Jesus can bring light to our darkness. Only Jesus brings life out of death. Only Jesus can set us free. And then, and only then, am I able to let go of what was so that Jesus can place into my hands “what will be.” Amen.