

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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One winter night, many years ago, I remember the power in my college dorm went out for almost two days. I don't know the specifics of why some generator didn't kick on, or what the larger problem was, but I do remember that we collectively decided that this was a good reason for an all night party. The power was out in about half the campus, and so we sat in dark hallways, lit only by exit signs and flashlights, and played board games when we should have been studying, gambled for pennies when we should have been going to class, and drank cheap vodka when we should have been sleeping. The whole night had the feeling of a festival — all because the lights wouldn't turn on.

In particular, I remember four friends from down the hall talking about leaving campus entirely and declaring the power outage a long weekend. I didn't have a car, and I also didn't think I was quite brave enough to just leave school for several days. I asked them where they were thinking of going. Reykjavik, they replied, as if it were the most normal answer in the world. In case you're not up on your geography, as I was not at the time, Reykjavik is the capital of Iceland and not the most usual of tourist destinations. My friends down the hall had somehow found out that tickets from Minneapolis direct to Reykjavik were deeply discounted at that moment, and they were thinking of going to Iceland for the weekend. I kind of demurred and muttered something about how I hoped they had a nice trip. But nothing in me at that time in my life was equipped to decide to go to Iceland on a whim. I didn't have the money. I didn't have permission. I didn't really have the kind of personality that ditched class to have an international experience.

And you know what? To this day I kind of regret it. I think, in general, if someone comes to you out of the blue when you're 19 and says, "should we go to Iceland for a couple of days?" the answer really should be yes. But I had responsibilities to attend to, studies to complete, and a pretty comfortable life that I wasn't in a hurry to disrupt.

So it is, I think, with the church's mission. I believe we regret the opportunities to serve God that we overlook by trying to keep things as they are. The Gospel last week as well as the Gospel this week talk about demons. Mark was really interested in the ways that Jesus and the disciples had power over unclean spirits and cast them out all over Galilee. I talked about spirits last week and so won't walk that particular road again. But I will point out something I think is wonderful in this passage. When Simon goes to find Jesus after Jesus had been out in the wilderness praying for a bit, Jesus tells his disciples, his friends, that it's time to pack up and go to the next town to do some ministry there. And, you know what, they follow. For all the silly, idiotic, and sometimes maddening things that the disciples do over the course of Jesus' ministry, in general they were pretty good at following. I wonder sometimes, are we?

Where is it that we are being called to travel for God? I know that Christian mission has a long and difficult history with going from town to town — cultural imperialism, violent colonialism, Christian manifest destiny. And yet even in the light of those historical horrors, I know that there

is a way to go answer God's call in the next town with wisdom and with honor. And I think the answer is starting from pure need. What do people need, and how can we help?

Yesterday, as I stood with Matt, Michelle, and Meg in the cold, I watched car after car drive up to drop off supplies for people who are housing insecure. We put hats, socks, coats, cleaning supplies, and gloves into bags to give to neighbors who are cold this winter. This is a small and simple example of going to the next town, but I think it's a powerful one. 40 people from St. Mark's brought items to give away to probably 100 neighbors in need. That, to my mind, is good mission. That, to my mind, is following Christ.

In these stories from Mark, the disciples never really get a chance to rest. Jesus has them up and out to the next town to heal and cast out demons there as well. So, I suppose, it invites us to ask what our next project is going to be. What is the next need that we are going to address out of our sense of Christian responsibility?

I'm not sure, but I know this: a global pandemic hasn't stopped our mission here at St. Mark's. And if COVID hasn't kept us down, I really don't think anything can.

So, when you say your prayers this week, ask God for a sign. A sign for our whole church. What is next? Where is the next place we are supposed to visit to do the work of Jesus? And when God is ready to tell us; we'll be ready to follow. I know from experience that we regret the trips we do not take. Amen.