



“Can You Ever Really Get Away?”

Texts: Psalm 46 and Mark 6:30-46

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It's that time of year when everyone is getting ready to get away. Summer vacations, special trips, family gatherings, time at the shore, time at the lake, time in the mountains, maybe even that extra special trip to a place where you've always wanted to go – summer marks the time when there's a break in the normal round of things and something special takes place.

When we were kids, in school, summer meant long days without classroom lessons. College years meant a break and one of those summer jobs that become more legend than reality as time goes by. Then came the world of work and no one handed you a couple of months of vacation – you earned them and learned to spend them with more care than money. And then, or so I am told, you enter the years of retirement which, on paper, are purported to be times of extended vacation, but every retired person I know is as busy now as they were when they worked.

Still, it's those vacations – those breaks – those times away with family and friends that loom large in our memories. When I was young, my family, which included my mother's parents, would rent a very small cabin at Canadohta Lake in Northern Pennsylvania. It was a week of pure delight. We would swim in the lake, canoe, row boats, share meals, have campfires at night – it was wonderful. There was a general store with a huge assortment of penny candy and those amazing Creamsicle ice cream bars with orange sherbet and vanilla ice cream. My grandfather taught me how to pitch horse shoes and I think we might even have gone to catch a fish or two. That was over fifty years ago and I can still remember the taste of the well water and the musty smell of the cabin when we first arrived.

Vacation has its roots in the Biblical idea of sabbath. Vacation time is a time of intentional rest and renewal. The ancient believers knew something we have forgotten: that each of us needs a little time to step back from the commonplace and let go of the schedules and calendars and just be. The way they told the story was that when God had done all of the divine work of creation, God took a day off. The lesson was if God could take a day off, we should take a day off too.

The wisdom of that teaching is borne out by substantial and significant scientific study. Over and over, studies have shown that we need “down time” – time away from work – time spent in whatever recharges our batteries and removes some of the stress that clogs up our lives. Blood pressures go down, our bodies release substances that reduce stress, our minds reorganize and clear out some of the extraneous clutter – these are all benefits of time away.

I don't know if Jesus knew all of that. But Jesus knew his disciples needed some time away. In our story from Mark's gospel for this morning, the disciples return from one of their first solo missions and Jesus listens to their reports. The story doesn't tell us how it went. It doesn't need to. But there is an implication that Jesus heard them, saw them, and concluded they needed some time away. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves a rest a while.” That's Jesus invitation to those who have given themselves to his mission. “Take a couple of days off. You've done well.”

Mark includes a little detail that is important. “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” There was a lot going on. Jesus and his disciples were in demand. They were continually surrounded by people, so much so that there were times they couldn't even stop to eat. Have you ever been that busy?

So, when you are surrounded by fishermen, grab a boat and get out of town. Jesus and the disciples get in a boat and head off to a deserted place – some translations render it a “lonely” place. It was an area off the beaten path. It was a place you had to intentionally head to. It was a retreat – a quiet place – a place where the normal things of life could be left behind for just a while and they could be together and recuperate.

But, you know the story, before they could even get to where they were going, the crowds which had been following them saw where they were headed and got to that place before Jesus and the disciples. So much for the day off! So much for the vacation! So much for down time, and rest, and renewal, and rejuvenation! Jesus and the disciples land the boat and a crowd is there waiting for them!

Can you ever really get away?

Maybe you've had a vacation where something happened that threatened your time away or maybe even altered it in ways you could not have foreseen or expected. Travel arrangements get completely messed up and you miss out on a day or two of what you were supposed to enjoy. Someone gets sick and the whole vacation is thrown into a cocked hat. There's a pressing issue back home and that means an early departure and a few days of the vacation becoming work days.

A year ago, Wendy and I took a cruise for our vacation. We learned a few things. Cruising the Caribbean in June is not always a good idea. June is the beginning of hurricane season and one arrived just as we were leaving New Orleans. No worries, the captain announced that we would just reshuffle the schedule and avoid the hurricane going where the storm wasn't. Sounded great. What the captain didn't mention was the possibility of white caps on the swimming pool on the Lido deck. It all turned out fine, but even when we are trying to get away from it all, the realities of life and weather can crowd into a vacation pretty quickly.

The broken axle on the travel trailer. The week of rain during the camping trip. The news report that so completely distracts you that you can't enjoy the vacation you had planned. The unexpected onset of a cold. The call from back home sharing the sad news of a death. The thought that starts gnawing at you and eats up your ability to focus on anything else.

Can you ever really get away?

The sheer number of distractions that clamor for our attention have the capacity to completely undo us, whether we are trying to get away or are simply going through our daily round of things. We can be in the most beautiful place on earth and we are distracted by something that steals the moment and we miss what we had been looking for. We can be with people that bring us joy and happiness and someone says one thing that takes us back to a time when we were not at peace and were harboring less than charitable thoughts. We can be relaxing and unwinding, we can begin to feel the tension leaving, and then someone will mention something inconsequential, and - just like that - we can feel the tension returning.

We try to get away, but we can't. The troubles and trials of life invade the space we have carved out for renewal. The chaos and confusion of life comes rolling into our calm and quiet like a thunderstorm and upsets everything we had hoped for.

In those moments, when we are tempted to believe that God has left us to our own devices, we need to go back and reclaim those words from the 46th Psalm that we read together this morning. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble...Therefore we will not fear...The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold...God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be overthrown...Be still, then, and know that I am God."

When the news is horrifying,
 be still, then, and know that God is with you.
When the plan goes up in smoke,
 be still, then, and know that God is with you.
When the doctor can't give you the news you want to hear,
 be still, then, and know that God is with you.
When the expectation does not become reality,
 be still, then, and know that God is with you.
When life in all of its complexities crowds in on you,
 and challenges your peace of mind,
 and demands more of you
 than you think you may be able to give,
 be still, then, and know that God is with you.

It is interesting, at least to me, that when the crowd met Jesus and the disciples, interrupting their plans, throwing the whole trip into question, Jesus saw an opportunity to minister to the crowd. What had seemed like a complete waste of time became an opportunity to witness to the goodness and compassion of God. The miraculous feeding of the multitude became a way for Jesus to share good news and hope and love.

Can you ever really get away? Maybe not. Maybe not completely. Life is what it is and the world is what it is. Sometimes reality is harsh. But, even when the world comes crashing in – in its beauty and in its ugliness – step back, take a deep breath, and remember (maybe even speak) the words:

 Be still, then, and know that God is with you.
 Be still and know that God is there.
 Be still and know that God is...

For now and evermore. Amen.



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