

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on September 12, 2021 (Proper 19, Year B)

In 1984, the rock band U2 released *The Unforgettable Fire* album. It was a big one, and you'll be glad to know I still have my copy — on cassette. Bryna was less than thrilled to learn this as I went rooting around the rectory last night. The collection includes a song titled "A Sort of Homecoming." And, for perhaps obvious reasons, I've been humming it all week. Because today does feel like a *sort of* homecoming, rather than a full-blown Homecoming Sunday.

In a normal year, this place would be pulsing with energy and excitement and anticipation. The pews would be packed; the full choir would be back in all its glory; after the Peace, thousands of Sunday School children would come streaming in — or at least that's how it always feels; coffee hour would be loud and festive as we visit with old friends and meet new ones; there would be a post-church barbecue and, of course, a bounce house. But things are not back to normal and we're left with a sort of Homecoming as we gather for our first post-Labor Day service.

You may not know that U2 actually started as a Christian rock band, and that their songs are full of religious imagery. "A Sort of Homecoming" is no exception. If home is ultimately a place where you are known and loved, a place where you can fully be the person God created you to be, any version of home we encounter in this life is always going to be incomplete. Whenever we return home, whether to our own homes or our church homes, we experience a sort of homecoming. Because there is only one true homecoming; which will take place not in this life but in the life that is to come. When we are reunited with and reconciled to Jesus Christ.

Nonetheless, coming home — whatever that looks like for you — whether it's returning to your family after a time away or sitting quietly in the pews of an empty church you've come to love or going back to your hometown, coming home offers us a glimpse of that true homecoming, when we will one day be joined to God in heaven. And so, incomplete as it may be, a homecoming is a beautiful and joyful and holy experience.

So, whether you are joining us this morning in person or online, I welcome you to this *sort of* homecoming. It was always going to be incomplete, theologically speaking, but I understand this day also feels incomplete in other ways as well. Partly because things aren't yet back to normal, but mostly because there's no bounce house.

We are certainly all getting used to things not going according to plan. Over the past year-and-a-half, we've all taken a master class in things not going according to plan. From disruptions in school and church and work and family routines to hiccups in the supply chain to having to pivot and adapt and turn on a dime, we are all living that old Yiddish adage, "We plan, and God laughs."

But, at one level, this same dynamic has been part of the Christian faith from the beginning. In this passage from Mark's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples how things are going to go down for the Messiah. "He began to teach them that [he] must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed." Yes, he also tells them that after three days he will rise again. But they don't hear that part and probably can't even comprehend it.

All the disciples know is that the suffering and rejecting and killing piece of this, which is what really stands out to them, is not part of *their* plan for Jesus. Peter even takes Jesus aside and says, 'Hey, man, you really gotta stop saying stuff like that.' Because this was decidedly *not* how they saw things unfolding for God's anointed one. In their mind, the Messiah was to be a conquering hero. One that would ride in with a great army and defeat the Romans on the battlefield. And in the process, the disciples themselves would stand in the reflected glow of messianic glory. *Their* plan for Jesus looked nothing like the vision Jesus himself was laying out. Suffering, rejection, death. It's almost as if Jesus was reading from the wrong script. This story was supposed to be a triumph, not a tragedy. At least in the way Peter and the disciples understood triumph and tragedy. We plan, and God laughs

There are few times when the great chasm between God and humanity is revealed in such stark ways than when we place Jesus' life and ministry over and against our own notion of "success." And Jesus makes clear the disconnect when he rebukes Peter for seeking a plan of his own devising rather than the plan of God's own making. "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

That is so easy to do, of course, because, well, we're human. We're not God! But at a certain point, as Jesus lays everything out, we do need to open our ears and listen. To stop leaning into our own hopes and desires and dreams and start looking to God's vision for us and for the world. To recognize that what we see with our own eyes is often not how God sees the world. Which means, and I know you'll find this shocking, but God doesn't care about our new car, or whatever worldly marks of success we hold up as signs of our own self worth.

For God's kingdom is an upside down kingdom. A place where the lowly are lifted up; the meek inherit the earth; the crucified one reigns in triumph and great glory; and our plans are not the ones that matter. We plan, and God laughs.

I'm not sure what this coming year will look like around here. We've certainly made a lot of plans. From outdoor Sunday School to holding our Sunday evening service in the Memorial Garden to a mix of online and in-person offerings. But the only one who really knows how everything will unfold is God. Our role is to be faithful and flexible and to admit that we're not in control of any of this. And that's a lot harder on some days than others.

In Peter's defense, he does stick around. He eventually abandons the plan he had envisioned for Jesus' life; he picks up his cross, and follows Jesus. Sure, he denies him three times along the way. Our humanity means we can't *always* set our minds on divine things. There are stumbles along the way. Yet Peter also becomes the rock upon which Jesus builds his church. In the end, he is martyred for his faith, but even with his failures and his utter humanity, Peter becomes an example for us of someone who strives always to set his mind on a higher plane. And, again, that's a lot harder on some days than others. We plan, and God laughs.