

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 18, 2021 (Proper 11, Year B)***

Jesus said, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” That. Sounds. Amazing. After the year we’ve had, I think we could all use a bit of time to rest. To renew. To reset. I know I could.

Now, I know that for the raging extroverts among us, after a year of isolation a deserted place is the last place you’d want to be. But, still, I think we could all use the rest. Or at least some time to reflect upon what really matters in this life. A chance to rethink our priorities after a year in which so much of what we thought we knew and expectations we had were overturned.

Of course, Jesus isn’t encouraging the apostles to rest because they’ve just been through a pandemic. But they have been through a storm. Not a literal storm, although they seem to encounter those often enough out on the Sea of Galilee. But a spiritual and emotional storm. They had just returned after being sent out two-by-two to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. The word “apostle” means “sent.” And they were sent out by Jesus to villages and towns to tell people about what they had seen and heard and experienced. They were sent out to preach repentance and to cast out demons and heal the sick in Jesus’ name.

Sure, they met with some resistance along the way. Remember, as he was sending them forth, Jesus gave them that advice to shake the dust off their feet and keep going if they weren’t welcomed in a particular place. Jesus knew not everyone would be open to his message of salvation. But overall, this was a successful mission. The apostles were changing lives and spreading the word about Jesus and day-by-day gaining confidence in their own call to ministry, in their own ability to share this good news with which they had been entrusted. And here they were regathering after their various journeys to swap stories and enjoy one another’s company. You can almost see them all coming together, still smelling like the road, dust clinging to their tunics, muscles aching, chattering away, laughing and eating, eager to share their experiences with Jesus and one another.

You can understand their euphoric state. They were reunited and energized and ready for the next adventure. They were also feeling pretty good about themselves. They had all taken a chance by leaving everything behind to follow Jesus. Their family and friends probably thought they had lost their minds when they immediately dropped everything to respond to Jesus’ call of “follow me.” But it was working. People were taking notice of Jesus and his rag tag crew. They were actively contributing to a growing movement; crowds were forming wherever they went. They were making a difference, and that felt good. Maybe their family and friends back home had even started to rethink their initial skepticism.

You see, we’re in that brief phase of Jesus’ ministry where he was treated like a rock star. Wherever he went, throngs of people showed up to meet him and greet him and seek his healing touch. There may have been some grumbling by the religious elite and the governing authorities, but there was also a buzz in the air. And the apostles — they were with the band! They were part of Jesus’ inner circle.

So I think Jesus' invitation to rest was a way to help his most trusted friends and ardent followers keep things in perspective. 'Don't get seduced by the celebrity, the crowds, the adrenaline rush.' And, as the story of John the Baptist's beheading which we heard last week and which immediately precedes this section in the text reminds us, there will be consequences to following Jesus, it is not without deep personal cost. 'So get your heads together, keep praying, and stay focused on the task at hand. It's not about you or about fame, but about God.'

That's not a bad reminder for all of us. We are all seduced by shiny things that draw us away from the love of God, from the essentials of life and faith. Maybe it's social media, or celebrity culture, or television, or name-the-addiction. But temptations and distractions abound. And it's easy to get lured away from what truly matters. That's Jesus' point.

A decade ago, I did a wedding here. Which is not unusual in itself, but the bride worked for the Red Sox and the groom produced Red Sox games for NESN. That's obviously how they met. And in the congregation that day were a number of former players. Jim Rice, Louis Tiant. Terry Francona was there, even though he had just been fired as the manager. That was the summer after the infamous chicken and beer scandal and the great late season collapse.

It was a fun day, and they were a great couple. But, in retrospect, I also remember being a bit too enamored with the celebrity of it all. I mean, as a kid I had watched Jim Rice feast on Orioles pitching, smacking home runs over the Green Monster with abandon. I could still mimic Louis Tiant's unique windup from watching him pitch for so many years. And there they were! Sitting in pews at St. John's.

Now, it's not like I asked for their autograph when they came up for communion. And I played it cool in the post-wedding handshake line. But in the end, no matter who was there, the day was about two people making their vows before God. That's all that mattered. It's not about the reflected glow of being in the presence of celebrity, but about being faithful.

Which is why, amidst all the hoopla and excitement in ancient Palestine surrounding the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus prescribes rest and renewal and reflection. And it's good medicine. A heavy dose of which will carry the apostles through both the heady and the difficult days which lay ahead.

One of the things about those 62 straight weeks of online church is that it did bring us all back to the essentials of our faith. It is ultimately about our relationship with God. It is about the ways in which we seek and serve Christ in all persons. It is about loving our neighbors as ourselves.

When you strip away all the external things in life, all the distractions, all the noise, all the shiny things — and when you strip away all the external things we cherish about St. John's — like beautiful music and stained glass windows and even coffee hour — when you strip it all away, this is what matters: loving God and loving our neighbor. And sometimes that's easy to forget.

We, too, have been through a storm. A spiritual and emotional one. Like the apostles, we, too, have regathered. We, too, have excitedly shared stories with one another. And we, too, could use some time to re-center, to recover, and to rest.