

St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet
Sunday, July 31, 2016

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Bishop, Diocese of Massachusetts

I am simply thrilled to be here with you at St. James the Fisherman in Wellfleet. I am delighted because it is my first opportunity to join you at St. James since becoming the Bishop of Massachusetts a little less than 2 years ago. My first visit to each of the 180 congregations in our diocese represents a special joy, and I am so pleased to mark that milestone with you.

I am thrilled also because you have given me an excuse to spend time with my friend Tracey Lind, and with Emily Ingalls. I spent a wonderful decade of my life and ministry serving a parish in Cleveland, where the Dean of our Cathedral, Tracey Lind, was an esteemed colleague and friend. It's just great to reconnect!

I am also thrilled to be here because, for over fifteen years three of my family's most favorite spots are right here within spitting distance: Newcomb Hollow Beach, Moby Dick's restaurant, and the Mass Audubon Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. Now I will add a fourth to those favorite spots – the Chapel of St. James the Fisherman.

Also nearby is a place the name of which has always intrigued me: First Encounter Beach. Probably you locals know the story very well. On December 6, 1620, a small group of Pilgrim explorers set out from their initial landing spot at what is now Provincetown Harbor in search of a settlement site. They sailed south to Wellfleet Bay, put ashore, and encamped along a tidal creek. In the pre-dawn twilight, a skirmish broke out. The air was filled with long feathered arrows coming from the surrounding woods. The Pilgrims blasted away with their muskets. The Indians fled; the Pilgrims gave brief chase. No fatalities were recorded. But it was scarcely an auspicious way to mark the "First Encounter." [Philbrick, pp. 70-73]

Of course, though it was the first personal interaction, it wasn't really the first *encounter*. A few days earlier a similar exploratory group had gone from Provincetown to Cold Harbor. There the Pilgrims found some Indian houses which appeared to have been hastily abandoned. As they had done in other spots, Captain Standish and his men helped themselves to some clay pots and wooden bowls and some food. Historian Nathaniel Philbrick writes:

Looting houses, graves, and storage pits was hardly the way to win the trust of the local inhabitants. To help offset the damage they'd already done, they resolved to leave behind some beads and other tokens for the Indians 'in sign of peace.' But it was getting dark and ... they must be going. In their haste to depart, they neglected to leave the beads and other trade goods. It would have been a meager gesture to be sure, but it would have marked their only unmistakable act of friendship since their arrival in the New World. [pp. 68-69]

Is it any wonder that a few days after this earlier encounter, the so-called "First Encounter" was not a happy one. The Pilgrims' efforts were characterized by good intentions, perhaps, but also by significant naiveté and a good measure of arrogance.

We are observing today your chapel's patronal feast, the Feast of St. James, transferred from the church's calendar on July 25. Let's consider for a moment the "First Encounter" between Jesus and James.

James and his brother John were at work with their father Zebedee, a fisherman in the Sea of Galilee. They were minding their business and tending their nets, when Jesus came along and called them. Immediately they left their father and his nets and followed Jesus. The next verses tell us only that they followed Jesus as he taught, preached, cured, and became famous.

I want to suggest that, like the Pilgrims' first encounter, Saint James's encounter with Jesus was also characterized by good intentions, naiveté, and a measure of arrogance. We can assume good intentions, I think, because they chose to follow a master who was "proclaiming good news" and curing sickness. Nothing but benevolence there. No reason to assume they did not have good intentions.

We can assume naiveté because, really, they had no idea what they were getting into. Even later, as in today's Gospel, James and his brother still display a striking naivete. They ask to be executive vice-presidents in Jesus' start-up corporation, crown-princes and coadjutors in King Jesus's upcoming reign. [*Aside Riff ... Matthew says it's their Mom Salome; ... but Mark tell us it's them!*] So Jesus says it directly: "Really, you boys have no idea what you are asking for. No idea! Complete naiveté."

And we can assume arrogance because it just seems to have been a character trait of James. We know this not only from today's gospel reading in which he and his brother want to lord it over their 10 fellow apostles and everyone else, but also from an earlier incident. When a Samaritan village declines to receive Jesus with hospitality, James and his brother say, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" That this impetuous arrogance was not an isolated moment is evident from their nickname, "Boanerges – the sons of thunder."

James and John, like Miles Standish and his friends, are full of good intentions, naiveté, and a hefty dose of arrogance. And, I expect, so are we. If the apostles are stand-ins, really, for all of humankind in the great gospel story – if that is so, and if St. James is well-intentioned, naïve, and sometimes arrogant, then I expect I am the same. And if Captain Standish and his companions were the same, and if the Pilgrims are – as they surely are – deep in our national DNA, then I expect our nation also is apt to be well-intentioned, naïve, and sometimes arrogant.

Captain Standish and James had another thing in common, too. Like James's view of the Samaritans, the Pilgrims' view of the Native Americans displayed a dismissive superiority which doomed their First Encounter before it even happened. Ignorant arrogance towards those whom we view with dismissive superiority is not new in our day. But it is certainly alive and well in our day. It plagues us in racism. It plagues us in nationalism. It plagues us in all the ways we objectify the other. Too often we are the Boanerges boys, the Sons and Daughters of Thunder, wondering out loud to God whether we ought not "command fire to come down from heaven and consume them."

So, how did this well-meaning, ambitious, bombastic "son of thunder" named James become the courageous, self-denying servant whom we celebrate today as the patron apostle of this place? He witnessed and participated in the transfiguration, crucifixion, and resurrection of his master. That's how. Between the events of today's Gospel, and his own martyrdom at the hands of King Herod Agrippa a decade or so later, James had witnessed and participated in the transfiguration, crucifixion, and resurrection of his master.

James stood high on a mountain at the Transfiguration and glimpsed the ultimate truth about this Jesus – that he was the full embodiment of all the Law and Prophets. In Jesus was the fullness of God's glory to which all the Law had pointed, the embodiment of the justice and righteousness which the Prophets demanded. James saw that, and that took him way beyond "well-meaning."

James saw Jesus arrested, saw the crucifixion or heard its report in excruciating detail. Such devastation and cruelty could not leave him naïve about realities of the world or the nature of humankind. James also knew his own failings and those of his fellow disciples – failure to keep watch, failure to claim their identity as friends of Jesus, failure to grasp all that that Jesus had taught them. Such failure could not leave his arrogance intact. And so, after the Resurrection, the Risen Christ took hold of this newly wise and humble man and made of him a courageous servant of God and of the people of God.

The hymn which we sang before the gospel this morning is one of the most hauntingly beautiful hymns we have. It speaks of the peace of God which, it says, fills our hearts and breaks them, too.

There is a great deal of talk in our world and in our nation these days about “security.” The peace of God is ultimate security. The peace which Christ promised, which was apprehended by his disciples, and which was understood by the poet William Alexander Percy who wrote this hymn – this is the peace of inner security. “Perfect love casts out fear,” says Scripture. God’s peace casts out fear. It is as likely to make us restive as restful. It is a peace which leads us towards activity, not passivity. It is the gift of “inner security which makes it possible to do the right thing.” [Donald Gowan, Kerygma series, *Shalom*, p. 41]

It is that peace which turned dismayed and frightened disciples like James, into courageous apostles and evangelists. It is that peace which turned a war-weary soldier named Alexander Percy into a crusader against the Ku Klux Klan and an inspirational poet. It is that peace which, by God’s grace, enables you and me to carry on when weary; to hold up when grieving; to look within when mistaken; to speak out when intimidated; to hope on when discouraged. The peace of God it is which thus strengthens us.

We pray for that peace which transformed James, that it might transform us as well. From well-meaning naiveté to faithful hope. From dismissive arrogance to self-denying service. Let these be ways you bear the name of Saint James.