

First Weekend in Lent (RCL/B): "Alone With God, As Much As I May Be"
Mark 1:9-15
February 20-21, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Here's the prayer I pray every morning before I get out of bed and every night before I fall asleep:

Leave me alone with God as much as may be.
As the tide draws the water close in upon the shore,
make me an island, set apart,
alone with you, God, holy to You.

Then with the turning of the tide,
prepare me to carry Your presence to the busy world beyond,
the world that rushes in on me,
till the waters come again and fold me back to you.

It's a prayer attributed to St. Aidan, the 7th century founder of a monastery on Lindisfarne, a tidal island in the North Sea just off the coast of Northumbria, England. I've shared some of this story with you before, in talking about my sabbatical time there with Pastor Mark. That trip, that place, have come to mind again because we were there in February, 2 years ago, and because our Gospel for this first weekend in Lent includes our Lord's time in the wilderness. Lindisfarne becomes a "wilderness" surrounded by water when the tide comes in, twice a day, for five hours at a clip. Nearly half of each day Lindisfarne is cut off from the rest of the world.

On the first part of my sabbatical leave, Pastor Mark & I went to Mont St. Michel, on the border between Normandy and Brittany in France. It's an island, too; in all the photos I'd seen, it was surrounded by water. So as we approached it, I was surprised there was a land bridge, a causeway, connecting it to the mainland. We learned that Mont St. Michel is only **truly** surrounded by water during the spring flood tides; returning there some spring to experience that is now on our to-do list ☺.

No such confusion with Lindisfarne. Our tour information was quite clear that our bus trip from the Edinburgh Airport to the Holy Isle was geared to the tides. There's no bridge, just a very flat road, a causeway between the mainland and the island, and also an old pilgrim's footpath across the muddy tidal flats. There are caution signs warning drivers **and** pedestrians that once the tide starts coming in, there's no time to escape it. All trips have to be scheduled accordingly. There are rescue boxes on stilts up to which stranded visitors can climb for safety. There they're able to weather the water better than their cars will, for sure. There have also been incidents when Royal Air Force helicopter crews have had to rescue people from the roof of their car. Wouldn't **that** be exciting -- and embarrassing! Probably expensive, too. Tide tables and safe crossing times are displayed on telephone poles, in shop windows, on A1, the highway on the mainland, and in parking lots (which the Brits quaintly call car parks). "Time and tide wait for no man." Life on the island revolves around the tides, including shop hours, since many shop owners and employees live off-island, and need to be able to arrive and leave safely.

Mother Nature ensures that there's "down time" on Lindisfarne, her Holy Isle. Humans don't have to make a conscious decision to unplug from the world. The tides do it for them. That's probably why Aidan chose that land to build a monastery for his community of monks whose lives were a rotation of work, study and prayer. The tides alternately removed them from and connected them to the world. Aidan was a Celtic monk, probably born in Ireland like his contemporary Columba. Aidan had spent decades on the Isle of Iona off the west coast of Scotland, where Columba had established a monastery. Then Aidan was consecrated as a bishop and sent off to found another monastery on Lindisfarne, across the tidal plain from the fortress of King Oswald of Northumbria, who had been raised on Iona to keep him safe from assassins, and who wanted his people evangelized. The night Aidan died, a young shepherd named Cuthbert had a

vision that led him to become a monk. At some point he decided to seek a life of prayer and solitude on the Farne Islands, in the North Sea, within sight of and an easy boat's journey from Lindisfarne. He was eventually made Bishop of Lindisfarne, and traveled far and wide sharing the Gospel with the poor, in particular. He did it out of love of the Lord and obedience to the Church, but what he really loved and longed for was his prayerful solitude, his wilderness time.

Even the company of his fellow monks was too much for Cuthbert, sometimes, and he'd retreat even further to a little (very little) parcel of land now called Cuthbert's Island. Mark & I walked there at low tide, not much more than a stone's throw from the Lindisfarne shore. There's a cross where Cuthbert had set up an altar, and a scooping out of the earth where he had sheltered from the wind. It wasn't much more than the depth of a rabbit nest in the earth and it made me cold just to think of him hunkering down there with the North Sea wind whistling over him. There's a story of how he'd spend the night in prayer (like our Lord) and then an otter would come and wrap itself around his legs to warm him. Word has also come down of how he loved God's creatures, especially the eider ducks who make Lindisfarne their home. He forbade his brother monks to kill them for food. Their nickname is now Cuddy Ducks, after their protector, Cuthbert.

Clearly, unlike Aidan and Cuthbert, we're **not** monks and, though we're blessed to live by the sea, we **don't** live on a tidal island cut off twice a day from the rest of civilization. And unlike our Lord, the Holy Spirit does not "drive" us into the wilderness. Unless we're talking about finding ourselves in a wilderness of physical or emotional pain, which we definitely did **not** choose, we are invited, not driven, to withdraw regularly to a quiet place to be with our Lord. The Lord beckons us to *"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."* (Mark 6:31b) What better time than Lent to cordon off time to withdraw from the distractions of the world, to lay down the weight of our responsibilities, to "Be still, and know that God is God"? (Psalm 46:10)

Solitude and loneliness are not the same thing. When beset by loneliness, I'm alone in a room feeling like the room is empty, despite my own presence. When blessed with a sense of solitude, I'm "solo" but I'm **not** alone, because I'm in the Presence (of my Lord). I can be with my Savior in silence and enjoy exquisite communion with Him. I can stop being a human **doing** and become a human **being** again. I can understand the wisdom of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's words: "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy." I can see myself through God's eyes and experience myself not as shamed, but as forgiven. I can stop investing energy in convincing myself I am either better or worse than I am. It is enough to be who I am in God's eyes: "created in Christ Jesus for good works, chosen as holy and beloved, freed to serve my neighbor."

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"The world that rushes in on us" is the world our Lord Jesus died to save. The Holy Spirit calls **each** of us to carry God's presence to that busy, waiting, suffering world that flirts with hope but is tempted by despair.... In order to do that, we need prayer, we need silent communion with our Creator, we need time to sit quietly in the Presence of our Savior, we need Spirit soul refreshment. Perhaps this Lent is our golden opportunity to practice the alternating dance of loving engagement with the world and holy withdrawal to the wilderness. Our Lord has led the Way by His own example. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

