



SAINT MARK'S

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

December 10, 2017
Second Sunday of Advent
The Rev. Patricia Matthews

Have you ever wanted to learn something new – and entirely unnecessary? Like playing the ukulele or the harmonica? Have you ever been curious about how to write a song? Or how to have a better conversation? If we have any interest in taking a course titled “How to be Idle”, then the Idler Academy in England is the place for us.

Their mission: to ask how to live. To ask how to become free in a world of jobs and debt. The academy says that “doing nothing is hard work, but important work, because being idle is about being free from wages, commuting, consuming, and debt. Being idle is about getting to live the lives we want to lead; it is about fun, pleasure, and joy.”

The Idler Academy warns about the inherent harm of the alarm clock. It encourages us to fight valiantly against the death of the leisurely lunch. The academy extolls the beauty of a warm cup of tea on a lazy afternoon. Our rector will like this one: It even tells us that fishing is a superb way of doing nothing, because it legitimizes idleness.

At this academy, being idle is a virtue because being idle asks us to be curious for no other reason than that curiosity is good for the soul. It calls us away from dull, stagnant lives. It cries out that there is a giant world out there - full of freedom that can easily be found when we step away from our regular routines prescribed by society. The Idler Academy calls us to Pause. Breathe. Wait. And watch for joy to return to our harried lives.

In some ways, this call is deeply Christian. Consider the original idler, John the Baptist. I daresay that John did not have an alarm clock in the wilderness. Nor did he have a wage, a commute, or any debt. He enjoyed leisurely lunches of locusts, and I bet he may have even made some lovely afternoon honey tea. He chose a life outside of the confines of society.

And from there, he cried out for people to come and join him. To turn away from the lives they were living, to change their habits, and to find new joy through baptism.

And the people heard. Something about this prophet caught their attention. John's message pulled some of them away from their quiet homes in the countryside. For others, his words grabbed them by the scruff of the neck and yanked them away from their jobs and their responsibilities in the bustling city of Jerusalem. On this day, they just picked up, turned from their regular walk to work or school, and moseyed right on out to the wilderness to hear this strange idler.

Sounds kind of refreshing. Or crazy. Or maybe a little of both. And that makes sense, because John's call is a siren song beckoning us to a new kind of life that is both refreshing and a little crazy. John calls us to get ready to hear all about the Kingdom of God.

Get ready, he says, because someone else is coming to tell us all about a Kingdom of reversals, where everything we think we understand about the world is about to be turned upside down.

Get ready, he says, to make all the crooked paths straight – because all the structures that we think give us control over our lives – those actually may be leading us to a slow death.

Get ready to knock down the mountains of old, bad habits that we think help us in this world – because those actually may be leading us to a dullness of spirit.

John cries out for us to resist walking those well-worn roads – so that we can be curious about new roads that lead us to freedom in God. John cries out for us to repent - not as a way of beating ourselves up, but rather as a way of cleaning out all the cobwebs in the corners of our souls in order to get ready to hear about a whole new way of living that – while challenging - is full of freedom and joy and maybe even some fun!

This adventure and new life that John calls us to is free and joyful and fun because it wakes us up. So often we lose sight of the Kingdom. In our ruts of daily activity, thinking, and working, we sometimes forget what lies all around us. We become numb to enjoying God’s creation. How would we respond if God asked, “Are you enjoying my creation?” Sometimes, we forget to look around and see and love all those around us – even unexpected people, who look like they may eat locust and honey for lunch. And John cries out to come and see! To prepare our hearts!

There are some traditional ways to prepare that are always good – like prayer, reading scripture, and worship. Obviously, we’re here, so we know about some of those.

But our reading from John gives us another adventurous and very tangible way to prepare for the coming of Christ: Head to the wilderness! We can journey off our well-worn paths, just like those first century folks who lived in Jerusalem but went into the wilderness to hear John. We can take a different exit off the interstate, drive through an unknown neighborhood, explore our world.

There’s another John who agrees. Geographer John Stilgoe, in his book *Outside Lies Magic*, says that the next time we are out for a walk, we should practice the “juiciest sort of indecision”. We become explorers when we “follow the sidewalk, turn right or left as the wind and sunlight or driving rain suggest. Walk three quarters of the way around the block, then strike out on a vector, a more or less straight line toward nothing in particular, follow the newer pavement, head for the shadow of trees ahead, strike off toward the sound of the belfry clock, follow the scent of the bakery back door, drift downhill toward the river.” We bring all our senses into use, in anticipation of discovering something new, of finding the

freedom and joy that comes through turning our worlds upside down in the most gentle and beautiful and life-giving ways we can imagine.

We do this because when we pause from our daily routine, step outside of our ordinary busy-ness, and journey into the wilderness, a miracle occurs: a grace busts through all the stagnant and dull and dead places in our lives and fills those places up with the adventure that is the Kingdom of God.

That is the grace that will be offered through the tiny baby that comes on Christmas, the one for which we wait this Advent season. And all we have to do right now is be curious enough about God to pause, to breath, to wait, and to watch and listen to that one strange voice crying out in the wilderness, calling us to allow our minds to be idle and to explore, to wander down new roads, develop new pathways - because those new paths will lead us to the reality that God is already there, waiting for us in the wild and unknown wilderness.