



Pastor's Wednesday Reflection September 9, 2020

I just want to get the heck out of here! That's what I told my wife the other day as we were sitting there together in the family room. The statement came without context or proper conversational antecedent. It just sort of bubbled up from deep within and I blurted it out. It seems to me that for many of us, the more you know you really can't go anywhere, the more you want to. I want to go somewhere else! I want to do something different! Stupid virus!

We ended up indulging my escapist hankering, taking a day to drive to the west coast of Michigan. We bought some blueberries and peaches. We enjoyed a physically distanced backyard reunion with Lori's sister and her husband. We sat in lawn chairs at the beach like the old folks we are, listening to waves crashing on the sand and watching the sun melt into the horizon. It was lovely. Then we came back home and, unsurprisingly, everything that we had gotten away from was right there where we had left it: The Same old Skokie. The Same old signs on the windows, "Facemasks required!" It's the same old stuck at home reality. Stupid virus!

I expect that next summer, when (hopefully) the vaccine has finally been developed, fully tested according to accepted phase 3 protocols, and distributed, we will be travelling once more. We'll slip the surly bonds of Skokie (Apologies to Neil Armstrong) and venture forth, successfully getting the heck out of here for real! I will warn you right now that we will be doing some serious vacationing next year!

Of course, I am not the only one ever to have felt that escapist impulse. We all feel some of that even in more normal times. One of the shows my wife watches with regularity is an HGTV show entitled "Beachfront Bargain-hunt." I suspect that it owes its popularity to the universality of that escapist impulse. In the episode that I saw most recently, a young family with 3 little kids was looking for a house on the beach. The search was challenging though, since they could spend no more than 750k on their weekend beach house. "We just need a place where the family can get away on weekends", said the mom. As a person who can barely afford one home at a time, and whose most expensive home was just a fraction of what they were looking to spend on their second home, it occurred to me that the difficulty of finding a decent beachfront home for under \$1mm just might be a good example of a first-world problem ... GEEZZ!

Here's something else that occurred to me; It's quite a first world problem to be agonizing over not being able to escape and get the heck out of here – at all!

Given the destabilizing impact of the virus, the upheaval and unrest around social injustice, the ongoing foolishness in Washington and craziness over the impending election this fall, it occurred to me that we don't hear about the refugee crisis any more. Do you remember the refugee crisis?

We may not hear about it any more, but the fact is that there is still a crisis. There are still more than 60 million displaced persons around the globe. For the most part, they are absolutely stuck. Some have lived in camps their whole lives. They've never gotten to go somewhere else. Some may never escape. The coronavirus has only made their plight more difficult. I am not really a captive here in my comfortable digs here in Skevanston. But folks who live in refugee camps absolutely are. It grieves me to think about them. When I do, I keep hearing the voice of Jesus: "I have come to proclaim release to captives...to let the oppressed go free".

As we pine away for our own personal escapes, we don't hear about the refugee crisis. We don't hear about the great "caravans" of Asylum seekers coming up from Central America and massing at our southern border either. While we don't hear much about these asylum seekers any more, they are still there -on the Mexican side of the border. Tens of thousands of them are stuck there in legal limbo in mass camps where they have been for the better part of a year. They are not going anywhere. They cannot escape. They can't come to the US because official immigration policy now has slowed the asylum process to a tiny trickle. They can't go home, because the threats that caused them to uproot their lives in the first place are still there. The onset of the coronavirus has only exacerbated the situation.

I spend a fair amount of time dreaming about getting the heck out of here on a vacation. I suppose the time would be more spiritually productive were it spent in prayer for those whose bondage is real, and who actually have something they need to escape from. For these brothers and sisters in Christ at the border who don't get to go anywhere and who don't get to have a life, *Dear Lord, please let these oppressed ones go free!*

I find myself daydreaming about escaping, about going on vacation and taking a break from all this. Refugees can't. Asylum seekers can't. And there are others right here within our borders for who are no less stuck and in bondage.

For any who think that the opportunity for success is spread evenly and fairly across the landscape, it will be troubling to note the well attested fact that the most accurate predictor of a person's success as an adult is that person's childhood zip-code. Not unrelated to this is the fact that due to a lack of affordable housing and enduring patterns of residential segregation—the zip code where people live is largely determined by income, race, and ethnicity, and many such zip codes lack high-quality housing, jobs, good schools, transportation, and other basics. There are

no physical borders or boundaries that prevent escape from an impoverished reality, but there are real boundaries nonetheless. Here too, the onset of the pandemic has only deepened the problem. Perhaps I should devote less effort to lamenting the fact that I am prevented from taking a proper vacation by this virus, and relatively more effort to finding ways to bless those for whom an escape from the present circumstance would mean real blessing and a more abundant life.

I've been reading through the gospel of John again of late. Of the 4 Gospels, John's is the one that slows down most noticeably at the end of Jesus' life. 5 of its 21 chapters are devoted to the last supper. In light of all of the foregoing, I find myself drawn to two things Jesus said as he sat with his disciples that last night. The first is a word of assurance. Jesus promised his disciples, and us, I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." I need to remember that there is not one moment and not one second of this corona - corrupted present reality that we are going through without the present and powerful love of Jesus. We may find our lives limited and circumscribed by public health caution... but we are deeply loved & faithfully attended to, and we will have life, full and abundant.

Here's the second thing Jesus said at that last supper. It was a prayer to his father, for his disciples spoken in their presence. "Father, I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."

As much as this pandemic has me chomping at the bit to get away and to escape, the fact is, the life of the disciple is less about getting away from it, and more about getting after it. You and I are sent into this world, to be the very presence of Jesus as members of the body of Christ. We are sent to proclaim release to the captives in Jesus, and to work to let the oppressed go free.

Just so you know, I am definitely going on some sizeable vacations next year. I still want to get out of here to rest and renew and recharge. But in the meantime, I think the faithful thing to do is to spend a little less time planning my escape and a lot more time and effort seeing what I can do to help others escape from the death of hopelessness to the light of the kingdom of grace.

I invite you to do the same.

Pastor Brown