

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
June 14, 2020
Graduation Sunday, Matthew 9:35-10:23

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

“In 1845, Sir John Franklin and 138 officers and men embarked from England to find the northwest passage across the high Canadian Arctic to the Pacific Ocean.”ⁱ As Annie Dillard tells the story of “An Expedition to the Pole,” these men were the celebrities of their time, the best known of England and the Western world, and the press glamorized their voyage. Chosen “as astronauts are today, from the clamoring, competitive ranks of the sturdy, [the] skilled, and [the] sane,” these proud souls were eager to confront the challenge which had taken the lives of equally sturdy men in the short decades before their campaign.ⁱⁱ

During those early days of Arctic exploration, “elaborately provisioned ships set out for high latitudes. Soon they [would] encounter the pack ice and equinoctial storms. Ice [would coat] the deck, spars, and rigging; the masts and hull [would] shudder; the sea [would freeze] around the rudder, and then [fasten] on the ship. Early sailors [tried] ramming, sawing, or blasting the ice ahead of the ship, before they [would eventually] give up and settle in for the winter.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“Sooner or later, the survivors” in these frozen cities would leave their Hoth-like worlds for warmer climes.^{iv} They would, however, soon find “the terrain [surrounding them] so rough, and [themselves] so weakened by scurvy, that [they could make] only a few miles a day. Sometimes they [would find] an island on which to live ... sometimes they [would turn] back to safety, stumble onto some outpost of civilization, or [miraculously be] rescued by another expedition; very often, when warm weather [came] and the pack ice [split] into floes, they [would drift] and tent on a floe, or hop from floe to floe, until the final floe [would land, split, or melt].”^v Very few of these men met a happy end.

At the outset of this morning’s appointment, Matthew recalls the missionary expeditions of Jesus, who “went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”^{vi} In response to their pathos, Jesus calls together the twelve disciples and explains, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”^{vii} He then commissions his friends to continue the very ministry he has modeled, granting the disciples the “authority to cast out unclean spirits and to cure every disease,” and directing them to use their gifts to “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, [and] cast out demons.”^{viii} *No pressure: just heal everyone, body and soul.*

By word of mouth and the ink of journals, stories of the first Arctic explorers made their way back to the British Isles, and the 138 officers and men who won the privilege of journeying with Sir John Franklin would have known well their tales: the challenges their forebearers faced, the mistakes they had made, the warnings of their struggles. Nonetheless, the two vessels of the Franklin Expedition carried only a twelve-day supply of coal – *for the two-to-three years' journey*. Instead of additional coal, or food, or perhaps prescription mood pharmaceuticals, “each ship made room [instead] for a 1,200 volume library, an [organ] playing fifty tunes, china place settings, cut-glass wine goblets, and sterling silver flatware of ornate Victorian design, very heavy at the handles, richly patterned, and engraved with the individual officers' initials and family crests. The expedition carried no special clothing for the Arctic, only the uniforms of Her Majesty's Navy.”^{ix}

These stores cried boldly that no cold, no ice, no endless night – *nothing!* – could possibly overcome the high dignity, moral character, and pioneering fortitude of a man in a well-pressed English uniform ... well, as it turns out, except for the cold, the ice, and the endless nights: “For twenty years, search parties recovered [their] skeletons from all over the frozen sea. Franklin himself – it was learned after twelve years – had died aboard ship. Their Captain dead, [their] ships frozen into the pack winter after winter, and their supplies exhausted, the remaining officers and men [like many expeditions before them] had decided to walk to help. They outfitted themselves for the journey from the ships' remaining equipment, and their bodies were found with those supplies they had chosen to carry.”^x

Now, humbled by the power of the natural world and schooled in survival by their many months' experience, surely *these* last surviving adventurers spent weeks stitching together heavier coats from the threadware at hand. Surely these men drafted, argued, and perfected extensive plans, committing to carry only what would serve their survival and the survival of their party ... surely? Well, years later, “accompanying one clump of frozen [sailors] ... were place settings of [the aforementioned heavy,] sterling silver flatware, and [even] a piece of that very backgammon board which Lady Jane Franklin had given her husband as a parting gift.”^{xi} Defying logic and their revered sanity, the frozen men were found donning only their dress uniforms “of fine blue cloth ... edged with silk braid, with sleeves sashed and bearing five covered buttons each.”^{xii}

In the Gospel verses following those we heard today, Jesus acknowledges that he sends the disciples out “like sheep into the midst of wolves,” – indeed, like dignified English explorers into the North Pole.^{xiii} To prepare for *their* expedition, he gives them those instructions familiar to the ear of us lectionary Christians: “take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.”^{xiv} Penniless and practically barefoot, Jesus does not launch the disciples this way to “toughen them up” or to have them pull at their own bootstraps and depend upon their own sufficiency. **No. Jesus asks his missionaries to empty their packs so that they will find their peace, joy, and comfort in the new world he sends to them to inaugurate** – rather than in the fleeting reassurances of those lives God's vision requires them to leave behind. Jesus asks his disciples to live fully into the promise that *God's dream will be enough* – yea, even the dead will rise! – but, in order for that grand dream to be realized, they must hand themselves over to those hopes *entirely*.

“Before you go to work on the soul of the world,” Jesus might have instructed them, “you must be at work on your own soul.”

As her essays nears crescendo, Dillard observes, “On the whole ... Christians outside of the catacombs [are not] sufficiently sensible of conditions.”^{xv} Not only were the men of the Franklin expedition poorly provisioned for *their* journey and *its* destination, but *all* Christians are woefully ill-prepared to greet the fulfillment of their faith. “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ... [Our] churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”^{xvi}

I have found one way or another to recall this passage in every congregation I have served.^{xvii} We Episcopalians love these words, and, proving Dillard’s point, I believe we love them because with a chemistry-set solution of fear and hope, we sense their truth in our bones; *our God is a mighty God*, as we so often pray and sing. By declaring that truth so boldly, we feel a little like the Pentecostals whose unwavering faith we secretly admire, but by using such florid imagery we witness our effete educations and effectively distinguish ourselves from their primitivism – let’s call it the best of both worlds.

Yet, setting aside the petty self-satisfactions, let us return to Dillard’s fundamental question: *Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?*

When we ask for God to transform our hearts and renew our nation, do we mean it?

Are we prepared to leave behind the dear familiarities of this world and embark on an expedition to where God is – a just creation beyond the myths of meritocracy and exceptionalism, where we are all *one* because we value the well-being of one another more than we value our own comfort and security?

Do we mean it? And if we do – if we really mean it – do we appreciate what we must leave behind ... *everything*: no gold, or silver, or copper, no bag, no two tunics, no sandals, no staff ... *everything*.

Oh, Trinity Church, believe: “the waking God” longs to draw us closer ... but from that divine territory, we can never return. Let us love and labor for nothing less.

ⁱ Dillard, Annie. “An Expedition to the Pole.” *Teaching A Stone To Talk*. Harper Perennial, 1982, p.36. I reference page numbers from the 1992 reissue.

ⁱⁱ Dillard, p. 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dillard, p. 33.

^{iv} Dillard, p.33.

^v Dillard, p. 33.

^{vi} Matthew 9:35-36.

^{vii} Matthew 9:37-38.

^{viii} Matthew 10:8.

^{ix} Dillard, pp. 36-37.

^x Dillard, p. 38.

^{xi} Dillard, pp. 37-38.

^{xii} Dillard, p. 38. These details invite us twenty-first century readers to scoff at the expeditioners' bad idea that their Arctic missions' common failure was failing to bring enough silver settings and matched china. However, I fear that we, lavishing ourselves with designer-label coronavirus masks, electric nose hair trimmers, and high frequency pest control radars, will appear no sturdier, saner, nor skilled-er for being spirits in the material world than Franklin's crew. God love 'em, the proud officers and men of the Franklin Expedition "[manhauled] their sweet humanity," as Dillard characterizes it, all the way to the edge of the North Pole. And while the sublime mystery of the Poles had aroused something holy in their souls, they could not let go of their English comforts to reach their destination. And it killed them. The same misplaced priorities may be our end, too.

^{xiii} Matthew 10:16.

^{xiv} Matthew 10:9. For those who would choose to make it, there's a playful joke here about Jesus instructing the disciples not to carry anything because, as Franklin's expedition proved, men don't know how to pack [comic rimshot]. Another worthwhile reading of Jesus' instructions points to the disciples necessary dependence upon God, their endeavors a learning curve toward recognizing they cannot do the work of the alone. How often do we storm out into the cold wearing only our short pants, slog in the office late into the night over a work project – or, in these work-at-home days, allow our labor to permeate every living space under our rooves – or bloody our knuckles assembling our children's birthday bicycle without benefit of the instructions, all because we refuse to admit that we need a little help: a heavier coat and a pair of blue jeans; a fresh set of eyes; or someone just to hold the nut on the other end of that ornery bolt.

^{xv} Dillard, p. 52.

^{xvi} Dillard, pp. 52-53.

^{xvii} I first heard Dillard's quote from the Rev. Charlie Cook, my professor of pastoral theology, around the year 2000. Therefore, the distance (in years) between Charlie's reference and Dillard's publication, is now less than the years between now and my hearing said reference. Time! It passes so fast. Charlie has had as much influence on my ideas of the Church and its ministry – and the heart of things – as anyone in my life. I carry with me everyday the gifts of his wisdom, mentorship, and friendship, and among the joys of quoting Dillard is my sense of conjuring some Charlie's juju.