

## Time Travelers

Hebrews 11:32-12:3

When children in Jesus' day were old enough to go to school, their primary textbook was their bible, our Old Testament. When they learned to read, they read about Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David, Esther and Ruth. They learned the Law God had given through Moses. They learned about the great temple Solomon built in Jerusalem and how the Babylonians raided Jerusalem and left that temple as little more than a pile of rubble. They learned about Ezra and Nehemiah who led the people back from Babylon and inspired them to rebuild the temple, and re-establish Jerusalem as the center of the worship of Yahweh.

But the children and their families did more than just learn these stories that formed their identity. Each year every family that was able would travel from their homes, even those who lived outside of Palestine, to Jerusalem to celebrate the Holy Days, especially Passover. The parents would talk to their children along the way, telling them what they would be seeing in Jerusalem, what they would be doing. They would tell and re-tell the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; of Joseph and his brothers, and how the brothers' murderous scheming ended up, by the grace of God, saving the family from starvation. They would tell the stories of the exodus, of Moses on the mountaintop with the Ten Commandments and Aaron down below making a golden calf; all the stories of David, the great warrior, who established his kingdom's capital in Jerusalem. They would talk about the temple and the sacrifices that they would make there, what it meant and how they were part of the stream of faith called Judaism, the faith of Yahweh, the Great I Am.

They talked about these things ahead of time so that when the children arrived in Jerusalem, they would understand the significance of this city. They would understand that they were there because of the faith of the women and men who had trusted God before them, trusted God enough at times to sacrifice their lives for him. They understood that, as Hebrews puts it, there was a great cloud of witnesses who had gone before them. Jerusalem was there, the temple was there, the faith was there because people before them had been willing to follow God regardless of the cost. Walking into Jerusalem was like walking back into time, seeing where it happened, almost being able to see David riding victoriously into the city, picturing the Babylonians tearing down the walls and burning the city, imagining Ezra and Nehemiah inspiring the people to put the broken city and temple back together again. Going to Jerusalem each year was like being time travelers entering the stories of those who had been a part of carrying their faith through time down to their own day.

In much the same way, two weeks ago, about twenty teens and adults climbed into an airplane and traveled back in time to relive the stories of those who had gone before them in this proud tradition called Presbyterianism. They went back to "the motherland," if you will, the birthplace of the Presbyterian Church, to see where it began. Like the families who would tell the stories before they arrived in Jerusalem, we told the stories before we got there, too. One Sunday night each month for the past year, our senior highs learned the stories of the places they would see. We talked of St. Columba who sailed from Ireland in AD 563 to bring Christianity to Scotland. He settled on an island along the western coast called Iona, and started a monastery there. It is one thing to know that. It is another thing to ride the ferry across from the island of Mull and walk where Columba walked, pray where Columba and his brothers and sisters prayed, to feel the peace that seems to settle there among the grazing sheep and cows, the ruins of the nunnery and the restored chapel where people, Christians, worship 1400 years after Columba brought Jesus' gospel there.

We talked of the Protestant Reformation when people like John Calvin and Martin Luther spoke out against the faults and failures of the church and were excommunicated for it. Calvin started a new kind of church in Geneva, Switzerland, among the many who came to study and learn from Calvin was a man named Patrick Hamilton from St. Andrews, Scotland. When he returned to that university town with these new ideas, he was promptly burned at the stake right outside the gate of the university. Etched into a stone in the wall above the gate is the blackened outline of a man's face. It is said that, as Patrick Hamilton died, that face appeared there. In the street below, where Hamilton died a slow death because the wood was damp, there is a group of stones placed to form the initials "P" and "H" and to this day, university students will not step on them for fear of failing an exam if they do.

We talked of another man named George Wishart who also came back to St. Andrews with these new Protestant ideas. He, too, was burned at the stake a block or so away, outside the castle where the Cardinal of St. Andrews, Cardinal Beaton, stood at his window and watched Wishart burn for his

Protestant beliefs. Wishart had friends, however, one of whom was a man of growing popularity and influence, a man named John Knox. One night, some of Wishart's friends broke into St. Andrews castle and hung Cardinal Beaton from the window out of which he had watched Wishart die.

As terrible as those stories are, it is an important lesson to understand that when church and state are tied too closely together, to disagree with the church is to be seen as an enemy of the state, a traitor to your country, and it took incredible courage for people like Hamilton and Wishart to stand up and say they disagreed, and for us to stand where Hamilton and Wishart were killed, to picture Cardinal Beaton looking out of, and then later, hanging from, that window of St. Andrews castle, made it real. It was almost as if we had traveled back in time and were there ourselves.

We talked of John Knox, that fiery preacher who began Presbyterianism in a church that had originally been a Catholic cathedral known as St. Giles cathedral in Edinburgh. We talked of his heated arguments with the Catholic Queen named Mary which took place in Holy Rood castle down the hill from St. Giles cathedral. But it is something else to stand outside of Holy Rood castle, which is still in use by the royal family today, and see where Knox and Mary Queen of Scots argued religion and politics, and it is something else altogether to have the privilege to worship in St. Giles cathedral on a Sunday morning, to sit at the foot of the pulpit where Knox inspired people to a new expression of Christianity, to take Communion among Scottish Presbyterians as those who owe our heritage to them. As I sat in worship and listened to the organ and the choir's voices echo through that stone hall, I became a time traveler, hearing Knox preaching of salvation by grace through faith, not by our works – words so easily accepted today, but words that brought death to many in his day.

We learned some other things in Scotland, too. We learned that French fries are chips and chips are crisps, that candy is called sweeties, that that fancy “L” they use for their currency symbol actually is an “L” and it stands for how much you're going to “Lose” when the British pound is translated into American dollars. We learned that most Scottish hotel bathrooms have heated towel racks that come on when you turn on the light, so when you get out of the shower your towel is warm and toasty. Some of us discovered these heated towel racks when we stepped out of the shower and accidentally bumped sensitive body parts into them...like getting sunburned where the sun doesn't shine! Some of us learned that haggis isn't so bad after all, that baked beans can be breakfast food, that fish & chips is the Scottish version of McDonald's, and that when the sign at the gas station says “1.06.9” that's not a dollar seven per gallon, that's a pound seven pence per *liter*, which roughly translates to \$7.00 a gallon. We learned that you can't play golf on the Old Course at St. Andrews on Sunday, which means you can walk the course and get your picture taken on the famed Swilken Bridge on the 18<sup>th</sup> fairway.

Personally, I learned never, never, never to eat airplane food on an international flight, even if it is from Scotland. And, no matter how great the trip, no matter how much was gained or learned, when I crawled my sick body into my own bed last Saturday, I felt like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz saying over and over again, there's no place like home, there's no place like home.

The update to our church history written in 1984 begins by quoting these words from an ancient Chinese proverb: *“To understand a man, first you must know what he remembers.”* It has always been a part of our Judeo-Christian faith tradition to understand who we are by remembering where we have been, and the cloud of witnesses that have gone before us. As we learn and remember their stories, we are inspired to carry the torch of faith for the generations that will follow us. You have done a good thing in sending your youth to Scotland, to become time travelers, remembering from whence they have come and the sacrifices of those who have gone before. To you who have had the great privilege of taking this journey through time, remember the cloud of witnesses that has gone before you, and, “Run with perseverance the race that is set before [you], looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.”

Amen.