

It seems that Southwest Airlines has tapped into a primal human emotion. Their commercials are funny and successful because they are so true. When things go wrong, as they so often do, the natural human response is to get away, as far away as possible. It appears to be a deep seeded, inborn reaction for nearly all of us.

It is such a natural response, that it permeates all aspects of our popular culture. It's not just in tv commercials, but also in our movies, the media and our music. Come sail away, come sail away, come and sail away with meee. Up, up and away in my beautiful, my beautiful balloon.. Fly away... Ride like the wind.

Those sentiments suggest an almost romantic attachment with the notion of escape. In fact, our country was founded on the idea. All of our relatives came here to escape duress or persecution of one kind or another. This is true not only for those of us with Western European roots but also for Navajo and other indigenous cultures, who we now believe escaped their problems by crossing The Bering Strait to come here. Any doubts I had about that theory were squashed when Jean and I spent time with the Athabascan people in Alaska. They are so much like the Navajo, we felt like we had just come home. Virtually everyone that comes to America does so to escape something else. Most recently, America has been an escape destination for people of Hispanic descent, as many have come here to work their way out of the extreme poverty of their homeland.

By far though, it is those of us of Western European descent that have raised

the art of escape to an art form. At each stage of our history, we have kept trying to escape something. First, we built cities to escape the dangerous wilderness. Then we fled the filthy cess pools we had created, heading west, off to the woods again. Eventually, we would run out of places to run, so we created a new form of escape. We would spend our days working in those cities that we made so unlivable, and then at the end of the day we would escape to a new place called the suburbs. Now of course, the suburbs have the same problems we were trying to extricate ourselves from, so escape has become the Southwest variety. Get out of our personal hells and travel somewhere else where maybe Shangri-la still exists.

It is not unexpected therefore, that our religious lives have followed similar paths. In fact, like America, most of the world's time honored religious traditions formed when the people attempted to escape persecution by others. After those initial formations, escape continued to be a hallmark of Christianity. In the second and third centuries, people would leave civilization to create their own cloistered religious worlds in the desert. The idea was to escape the corruption of the "real world" by forming a segregated community of people who "truly understood" the spiritual life, therefore creating a place unblemished by society's ills. The trend would continue in the fifth and sixth centuries when Christianity came to Europe. By the early Middle Ages, monasteries and convents would be built like fortresses, to physically separate the "holy folk" from the upheaval and conflict all around them. By the time of the Reformation, many Christians believed that the only "true and holy" form of their religion was found in these cloistered monasteries.

But America, steeped in the art and practice of escapism, took the religious variety to a level never seen before in the rest of the world. Entire denomination formed in this country in the mid 1800's, whose central theology was all about escape. Churches like the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah Witnesses, and the Church of Christ all saw the world as evil and corrupt, seeing a need to escape it entirely. Apocalyptic eschatology (revelations about the end times) would become the entire framework for these new religions. People would spend all of their time studying the Book of Revelation and interpreting it as a future event where God would create an escape route for all them, a rapture where they would be beamed up out of all this mess. Religion in America would become infatuated with escape from this world.

Other religions formed at the time seeing a need to completely segregate themselves from the here and present world. Perhaps one of the greatest religious experiments of all time was one that happened just up Route 89 on the other side of Kanab, in the town of Orderville. Here a Mormon population created and lived in their own world of escapism, a totally communistic community set in the middle of the capitalistic world surrounding them. And it all seemed to work until the people there started being exposed to the outside world, particularly those city kids from St. George, who started showing up in their fancy cowboy boots, whereupon the kids in Orderville wanted to know why they couldn't have them too.

Today's Gospel marks the birth of our long religious history of attempting to flee from the world. If there were ever a people in need of escaping, it is the community to whom the author of the Fourth Gospel is writing to today. Jewish people have

obviously faced more persecution than any religious group in the history of the world. The first century was no different. And it is good to keep in mind that the people being written to in today's Gospel are most certainly Jews. The time is approximately 70 years after the death of Jesus. John's community is obviously being attacked by the Roman culture that has absorbed them. Not only had they killed Jesus, but these Roman leaders think nothing of killing any Jewish leader who represents a threat of any kind.

But the Jews who are hearing today's Gospel that includes Jesus' final prayers before his death, are not only facing the external persecution put on them by Roman society. They are also facing internal persecution as well. Their own Jewish leaders have begun questioning whether this community of Jewish Christians really are Jewish. There is, in fact, a movement, a very strong movement, to kick these Jesus freaks out of the synagogue. The prayer that Jesus utters in today's Gospel seems specifically addressed to John's community who is being persecuted from both the inside and the outside. More than anything else, these people want to run, they want to escape the pressure being put on them from all sides. They want a way out of this mess. They want God to step in the middle of all this and provide them an escape route to another world. They want a rapture. But instead of praying to God to beam them up and get them out of their awful predicament, what do we hear Jesus pray to God? "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them." And then, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

No escape. No beam me up theology. No bullet proof bubble around the church

to protect God's people from the unholy folk out there. Instead, what Jesus asks God for is protection for them, because...he does not want them going anywhere. Jesus tells them very plainly in the midst of this prayer that escape is not the answer.

Of course, it is not just John's community Jesus is talking to today. His words apply equally, perhaps even more, to the generations that followed the first apostles and John's persecuted community. He is also calling us today to stay right here in the trenches, right here in the midst of the people who are calling us names and persecuting us. We are to stay here because, if we do not, how is anything going to change? How are we going to bring about God's kingdom, if we are living in gated communities separated from the pain and suffering in the streets?

In other words, what Jesus is doing in today's prayer is passing the baton. Jesus took it from God the Creator, and he passed it to the apostles, and they passed it to John's persecuted community, and they passed it to us. While on earth, Jesus did his best to live into the words of the prophet Isaiah. He proclaimed release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and he worked to free the oppressed. But now, he tells us, it is our turn. "As you have sent me into the world," Jesus prays, "so I have sent them into the world." They and we are now Christ's body. And what Jesus tells us is that it's really difficult to free the oppressed if we are not there with them in the trenches of the world. If we are going to bring about the kingdom of God, Jesus tells us, we must not be segregated from it, but engaged with it on an intimate level.

Jesus also makes it clear in the midst of this prayer that the apostles and we do not belong to this world, just as he did not belong to this world. We are, he tells us, "to

be in the world but not of it.” It is not the easiest of calls, but it is a clear call. We are to stay engaged and connected with everything that happens around us, but at the same time we are not to succumb to the world’s values or its pressures.

It is also telling that Jesus ends this prayer by talking about how we find truth in our lives. For centuries, we have aspired to holiness and truth by separating ourselves from the evil and corruption surrounding us. We have built entire religious structures around escaping this ugliness. But Jesus says that by sending the apostles out into the world to do this work, he is sanctifying them in truth. What Jesus tells us is that we do not discover holiness by becoming a monk. We discover God’s truth by immersing ourselves in the contaminated world and trying to change it.

In the world in which you and I live, today’s final public prayer of Jesus may be even more important for us to hear than it was for John’s persecuted community of the first century. I do not think there is a one of us here who has not been so stressed by the immense anxieties of the contemporary world that we have not wanted to escape it in one form or another. We are also always exposed to the endless violence and evil of the world around us and it is all but impossible to not feel helpless in the face of all of it. The pressures of contemporary society are exhausting in so many ways. It is no wonder that alcoholism and drug abuse are the most prolific diseases of our time, because they offer what appears to be the answer, escape, escape, escape.

Of course, we all know in our heads that this brand of escape never works and in the long run creates problems much worse than what we were trying to escape in the beginning. But the revelation today is that it is not just the escape vehicles of alcohol

and drug abuse that do not work, but all forms of escape. Whenever we close our eyes to the evil, corruption or pain and suffering in our world, we are participating in a form of escape. When we create churches that become barriers between us and the world, or we create theologies that center on rapturing us out of this world, we are doing the same thing. We have often used religion as an escape, and prayer as an evasion. But when we do so, Jesus tells us that they are not really religion or prayer at all. As Jesus' prayer makes clear, there's no sense praying for something unless you are willing to have God utilize you in bringing it to fruition.

All this may sound very counterintuitive. Re-energizing ourselves by not escaping. But just ask any alcoholic. Escape always sounds good and it may even feel good at the beginning, but it is never a real escape at all. It is a spiraling right down into what you were trying to avoid. Instead, let us confront our fears. Let us face down our anxieties. Because it is in that engagement that we will find God's truth, a truth that will set you free, a truth that will bring about the kingdom of God, a truth that creates health and holiness, not just for you, but for all of the world with which you had the courage to engage.

None of this is to suggest that all of us should not take a break and that we should not take part in retreats and contemplative practices. Wanting to get away, as the Southwest ad says, is not a bad thing, it is a necessary and healthy thing. In fact, your Vestry is going to encourage all of you to have some down time this summer. But when we wanna get away, perhaps the most important question we might ask ourselves is this. Are we looking for a rest so that we can re-energize ourselves or are we trying

to escape?

May each of us have the courage to avoid escape and stay engaged with the dangerous world in which we live. May each of us remember Jesus' prayer to God, knowing that if we can remain engaged with our anxiety ridden world, God will protect us.

Jesus passed the baton to the apostles. They passed it to us. Take the baton. Change yourself. Change the world. Amen.