

Proper 16, Year C

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

Good morning! It is good to be home.

As most of you know, I've just returned from a three-month sabbatical. I am happy to say that it has been a wonderful season of rest, reflection, renewal and reorientation. And, right off the bat, I should say that one of the most important things I've learned this summer is that we should *always* begin almost everything we do—every sermon, every prayer, every conversation—with *gratitude*. Gratitude is the key that opens the door to a deeper life in God, not because it opens God's heart but because it opens ours. I have loads to say after being away for three months, but the most important is "thank you." These last three months have been, for me, life-changing, necessary, and full of surprises. I am *thankful* for the gift.

I am thankful for my wife Jay, a brave and beautiful working woman who, with two small children at home and an entire summer to fill, looked at her husband three months ago and said, "Honey, go. I promise, we'll be fine." There is no greater picture of God's grace and generosity in my life than Jay Lacy, my wife of twelve years and best friend for life.

I am thankful to everyone who leads and serves this parish. Our many volunteers and ministry leaders, all of whom are so capable, loving, and dedicated. Our staff: Stan, Emily, Sally, Naomi, and Arthenia. Our vestry, especially our wardens Alan and David. You have all been dauntless in the face of broken sanctuary air conditioners, ladybug infested pipe organ repairs, and all the peculiar challenges of parish life while remaining steadfastly faithful and committed to the work God has given us to do. I am so proud of you.

And I am thankful to *my* colleague and *our* friend, your assistant rector Ellen Richardson. Knowing Ellen as I do, I know that she has pastored and pestered you, challenged and changed you, loved you and been loved by you. She, too, looked me in the eye three months ago and said, "Go. We'll be fine." She was right, and I am grateful beyond measure.

To them, and to all of you, *thank you*. Thank you for the tremendous gift of your love, not for me, but for the Lord Jesus Christ and for one another.

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I've been back a week, and many have said, "Fr. Lonnie, remind us: where exactly did you go? What exactly did you do? And, most importantly, did you find what you were looking for?"

When I left in May, I had three goals:

1. to live in silence,
2. to live in simplicity, and
3. to rekindle my lifelong friendship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am happy to report that the Lord is very generous, and he did not let me down.

For the whole month of May I lived at a Catholic Jesuit retreat center near Atlanta called [Ignatius House](#). Total silence: no cell phone, no Internet, no TV, no radio, no news, no podcasts, no nothing. I went there to do what's called the [Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius](#), a kind of spiritual boot camp invented 500 years ago by a Spanish soldier-turned-mystic-turned-priest-turned-saint named Ignatius of Loyola.

The only verbal conversations I had were a few minutes each morning with my spiritual director, a priest named Bruce, who I can only describe as being like our own Roy Rankin, but a Jesuit priest instead. On my first day there, Bruce said, "Lonnie, while you're here you need to set aside five hours a day for silent prayer and conversation with God. Break them up, an hour at a time throughout the day. Commit to the whole hour, whether you feel like something is happening or not." Added to that, I journaled extensively about the experience, usually two or three hours a day. This means my fulltime 8-hour-a-day job at Ignatius House was to shut my mouth . . . to listen to God . . . to respond to God . . . and to write it all down. You don't come away from that unchanged.

In June and July I took that experience and moved with Noah, my black Labrador retriever, to a cabin in Pine Mountain, Georgia where I continued in silence and prayer. Though I occasionally encountered people, my basic rule was, "Speak only if it is an act of hospitality to do so." (Incidentally, that's not a bad rule to live by for *all* of life, sabbatical or not.) While I no longer had Bruce to wake up to, the dog woke me every morning with the leash in his mouth and forced me to get up, get out, and go hike the mountain while continuing my life of prayer. By the end of the summer—to my utter astonishment—my Fitbit reported that I had walked and hiked over 500 miles. I've lost twenty pounds. I also read a brand new [600-page book on the Crucifixion](#) that was, in its own right, life-changing and faith-deepening for me. To top that off, I got to meet, chat with, and do a Bible study with the author last week while Jay, the girls, and I closed out the summer with a week of vacation. It was a true joy.

Toward the end of my time at Ignatius House, my spiritual director Bruce, a big sports fan, said, "Lonnie, do you know that old saying, 'Baseball's been very, very good to me'? You may find at the end of your sabbatical that the most articulate thing you can say is, 'God's been very, very good to me.'" He's right. I have the feeling I'll be processing the fruits of this journey for a long time to come. I look forward to sharing many benefits of it with you, little by little, as the months unfold.

The one thing I *can* say today—the one net result I have brought home as an absolute certainty—is that there is tremendous friendship to be had with the Lord Jesus Christ, if only we will get out of our own way and let him at us. Someone saw me this week and said, "I bet you're pretty starved for human contact." "No, not really," I replied, probably to their dismay. In fact, it has been an adjustment to be back among other people and the noise of society. When you're in the company of the living God all day every day for three months, you find you're not as lonely as you thought you were, even back when you were surrounded by people.

I have come home, and I see that the world is just as anxious as it ever has been. Having caught up on the news, I don't think it's inaccurate to say that the world grew more anxious while I was away. I can see it. I can hear it in your voices. It is palpable in our neighborhoods, our homes, and our society. This has been an insane summer, harkening back almost to the tumult of 1968.

We keep hoping and thinking that we are in control—that if we can just love our neighbor hard enough, speak to others convincingly enough, live our lives well enough—that we can actually make the world a better place and raise humanity to its destiny of peace and total security.

But the events of this summer just prove that we as a species are still terrifically bad at running the world. We are powerless; we are worried; we are plagued. We want so desperately to be great again, to make America great again, to make St. Anne's great again, to make life great again. But when you step back, shut your mouth, and open your ears for even just fifteen minutes, you begin to realize that none of us actually has a clue about how to do it.

In short, we still need Jesus.

Despite all our noble strivings, we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves. We need *God* to be the agent of change in our world, in our church, and in our lives.

This is exactly what we hear in our readings today. Isaiah comes along and declares, “You all have this this yoke around your neck, this millstone, this burden . . . and nobody put it there but you. You are hunched over, gloomy and parched, riddled with anxiety, anger, and apprehension. You point your fingers and accuse. You speak evil against all others. In your desperate need to be right at all times, you have lost sight of the living God.” If Isaiah were writing today, he would say, “You are hunched over, bowed to the anxiety of your Facebook feed, bowed to the anxiety of Fox News and MSNBC, bowed to the anxiety and idolatry of a world with all the wrong values.” And he would be right.

We are like that woman in the Gospel, plagued by a spirit that has bent us over. When Jesus heals her, do you know what Luke's Gospel really says? Our translation today said, “she stood up straight,” but listen to the King James Version, which is much more faithful to the Greek. It says, “[Jesus] laid his hands on her: and immediately *she was made straight*.” *She* did not do it. *She* did not stand up. Instead, she *was made* straight. Something completely outside of her—outside her control, outside her ability, outside her grasp—reached into her and *raised her up*. *She* was not the agent. ***GOD***, through the intercession of Jesus, was the agent.

We Christians talk so dadgum much about *ourselves* these days. We talk about who *we* are, what *we* must do, who *we* must become, how *we* must act, who *we* must elect, how *we* must run heaven and earth. Meanwhile, we have all but stopped talking about who *God* is, what *God* has done, and what *God* is still doing today. It is as though we have forgotten how to believe that *God* is the mover, the agent, the one in charge. But brothers and sisters, I have been to the mountaintop; I have come home to valley; and I am here to tell you that the Lord God Almighty is alive and well. The Holy Spirit is still moving over the deep, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is right here—*right here!*—ready to raise us up, if we will but just *shut up* and get over the hubris, selfishness, and fear that we carry on our shoulders every day.

I am aware that these may sound like the words of a madman. Perhaps you're not sure if you can trust a man who says he's “been to the mountaintop.” Good. *Don't* trust me. I'm not the agent. But in just a moment, the *real* Agent, the *real* Actor, the *real* Almighty is going show up in a big way, and if you'll let him, he's going to blow your socks off.

In mere minutes, we as a congregation will rise, and we will turn our attention toward that font as we baptize two little girls. Their parents and godparents will stand near them. I'll pour some water and say some old, old prayers. You all will look on and make some hefty promises as a congregation. But as all that happens before your eyes, don't blink! *DO NOT BLINK*, or you'll miss it. Because right there, *right there* in the heart of this holy place, it is the *Lord your God* who will be acting. He is going to take those two little girls—two little girls whom we have brought into such a sinful, anxious, unsafe world—and he's going to move *on* them, move *in* them, *raise them up*, and *fundamentally change who they are*. Without so much as a whisper, he is going to make them heirs of his kingdom, daughters of his household, and members of his royal priesthood. If that's not worth the price of admission today, nothing is.

And let me tell you something else. Whether this church has a paid youth minister or not, whether we have gobs of money or not, whether we have one service per Sunday or not: we've got babies, we've got people, and we've got the Spirit of the living God. Beat *that* with a stick.

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Earlier this week, someone said, "Well, Lonnie, you're all done with sabbatical. Are you happy again? Is your battery charged up again? Are you ready to conquer the world again?"

The answer may disappoint you, but no.

I *am* happy again. In fact, I'm downright joyful and exuberant again, more than I have been in at least two years. I have re-found the source of my joy in the friendship of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of my family. That makes all the difference in the world.

I *am* rested again. My battery is freshly charged, and I hope to keep some patterns in my life that will help me stay that way. But I will need your patience and understanding because those new patterns will require a fundamental shift in the way I use my time as your rector. I can no longer be at every meeting. I can no longer mediate every committee conflict or be involved in every parish decision. I can no longer sacrifice my health or the life of my family on the altar of St. Anne's. At the end of the day, my job is simple. It is not to be your best friend, your therapist, or your CEO. My job is to pray with you, to teach you the faith, and to give you the tools for being lifelong discerners of God's will and disciples of God's way. The rest is yours.

As for being ready to conquer the world again? That's the biggest "no" of all. The greatest grace for me this summer—the grace for all of us, if we'll take it—is that the world is not ours to conquer. Someone else has already done that for us, and his name is Jesus, the crucified Son of God. The magnificent joy in my life right now is that while I have no clue where we are headed or who we will one day be—as a church, as a nation, as a people, or as a world—I *do* know who's in charge. I love him, trust him, and am called according to his purposes, not my own.

And on this day, nothing makes me happier than the prospect of following a God like that . . . with people like you.

Amen.