

Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

**A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER,
APRIL 20, 2008, AT ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A recent issue of the National Geographic shows a dramatic increase of the faithful flocking to different sites of pilgrimages all over the world. I think that phenomenon shows that a lot of people want to search for the way, the truth and the life. I did my own part last week when I attended the annual meeting of the Committee on Science, Technology, and Faith of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church at the Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico. The Ghost Ranch is a Presbyterian retreat center, surrounded by the colorful mesas and majestic mountains made famous in Georgia O’Keeffe’s masterpieces. Even though the Ghost Ranch is very remote, located well off the beaten path, some of us would recognize quickly because it has been featured in many movies. Recently, scenes for the new Indiana Jones movie were filmed there. Even though this retreat center is off the beaten path, and has only a few dirt roads within its approximately thirty thousand acres, similar to the size of Manhattan, my pilgrimage still had further to go, and did not reach its climax until we ventured out last Sunday morning to find the Monastery of Christ in the Desert.

The Monastery is situated in a beautiful canyon to the north of the Ghost Ranch, surrounded by miles of government-protected wilderness, thus assuring and promoting the solitude and quiet intrinsic to monastic life. Its remoteness, however, means that it’s not the easiest place in the world to get to. Just to give you an idea, we got lost twice trying to get there and we had to go back to the Ghost Ranch to ask for directions again. I mean, it’s thirteen miles of red dirt road off of the highway. Our little rental car almost didn’t make it.

But God willing, we arrived safe and sound at last, after passing through some most gorgeous high desert lands near the cliffs along the life-giving Rio Chama. We shared the road from time to time with grazing cattle. When we finally got to the Monastery, we passed through a stone garden with the Stations of the Cross before arriving at the church. There, we were greeted by Father Christian. His kindness and welcome truly demonstrated the Benedictine spirit: let all guests who arrive be received as Christ....let all kindness be shown to them. ---- Rule of Saint Benedict.

I asked Father Christian how long he had been at the Monastery. He said, “thirty one years already,” since he was in his twenties. Immediately, that fact gave me three realizations. First, I just had my thirty-second birthday not long ago; second, I could hardly imagine living in such a secluded and hidden place for thirty-one years, (for now, that looks like an entire lifetime for me); third, Father Christian certainly didn’t look like someone who could be approaching sixty already. Honestly, you need to be quite healthy and valiant to be able to thrive in such a challenging and remote spot of the world. The monks live the Rule of Benedict, a life of prayer and work in community. This is where many have found access to the way, the truth, and the life. And some stay for a lifetime.

Brothers and sisters, what is the way, the truth, and the life for you? Have you found the way, the truth, and the life? In the Gospel lesson from John we just heard, Jesus proclaims that he himself is “the way, the truth, and the life.” He also says, “...I am in the Father, and the Father is in me.” These are very bold claims. And if they were not true, then these claims would be blasphemy. Many in the first and second centuries did not and could not believe that “the way, the truth, and the life” had indeed come among them. According to biblical scholars, the target audience of John’s Gospel—the Johannine community---was ostracized and dispelled from the synagogues because of their new found faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. That’s why they were persecuted by the religious hierarchy of their day.

So finding and following “the way, the truth, and the life” has a cost. Sometimes, it costs our lives, such as in the case of St. Stephen, the Protomartyr, whose story of martyrdom we heard in Acts today. You see, finding

meaning in life can be dangerous. Following Jesus is not always easy. Sometimes, the road is long, dusty, and unclear. But countless faithful and valiant souls persevered regardless of the challenges of the path they took. If we were seeking a crown of glory in the end in terms of worldly success, we would surely be disappointed. But if we are seeking God for the sake of God and for the sake of others, we will find the end of our pilgrimage very satisfying.

In other words, if we truly believe that as human beings, we are made in the “image of God.” Then, it suffices to say that our ultimate calling in life is to be in communion with God. Thus, we will not find satisfaction or be truly happily human until we find God. I believe that Augustine of Hippo truly understands and lives out his God-seeking life when he says, “Our souls find no rest, O Lord, until we rest in you.” So dear friends, if you are still busy trying to find meaning for your life; if you are still confused about “the way, the truth, and the life,” fret not, for you are in good company. The Church can help you.

I have used the “journey” language a lot in our communications. The reason for that is that I believe that all of life is a pilgrimage; and this pilgrimage leads us to God in the end. Very few of us have the calling to walk this pilgrimage alone. That’s why we are the church. That’s why we are the community of the faithful. That’s why we are the communion of saints. And that’s why we are All Hallows! On my way to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, I felt so blessed to have a fellow travel companion on those thirteen miles of red dirt road. Here at All Hallows, we should all feel blessed to have our parishioners as our fellow pilgrims.

There have been, are and will be times when we lose our jobs. There have been, are, and will be times when we lose our health. There have been, are, and will be times when we lose our affection for one another. But in the end, God has put us together for a purpose. That purpose is our way, our truth, and our life. Indeed, we are each of us a work in progress, because now we only see dimly. One day, we shall see face to face. One day, we shall see God’s glory face to face. But in our pilgrimage as Christians, we have been blessed with a God who came among to make God’s mysteries tangible, comprehensible, and most importantly, humanly accessible in Jesus the Christ. Jesus Christ makes the mysteries of God intelligible for us. Jesus Christ is indeed the way, the truth, and the life. We immerse ourselves best in this good news when we faithfully celebrate the Holy Eucharist; when we actively seek spiritual growth by attending our various formation programs such as the rector’s forum and other classes; when we gather as a community to clean and safeguard our beautiful church grounds; when we show up and hold each other at the loss of a beloved parishioner; when we share our abundant gifts with those who have less within and outside of our parish.

You see, finding the way, the truth, and the life really has two parts to it. First, we need to build a personal relationship with God. Second, we need to find an exterior expression of that interior relationship with God. That’s why the Church has evolved out of God’s abundant grace. I have come across a lot of people who say, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” A deacon friend of mine likes to reply, “Well I’m religious, but not spiritual.” I guess that ends the conversation. I like to say that I’m both spiritual and religious. I think that when people say that they are spiritual, but not religious, what they really mean is that they don’t need organized religion; they don’t need the Church. I think that is very sad indeed. I think that is sad, not because I am a priest, but because I believe that we cannot live out our full potential as human beings without coming together as community for the purpose of seeking God.

Fortunately, I am preaching to the choir here today, no pun intended. We can appreciate and understand the importance of the Church in assisting us to finding the way, the truth, and the life. Next Saturday, we will celebrate a major milestone in our common life at the Celebration of our New Ministry. Bishop Rodney Michel, Assisting Bishop of Maryland, the sometime Bishop Suffragan of Long Island, will formally institute and induct me as the fortieth Rector of All Hallows’ Parish, South River.

I would like to emphasize that this service is not about Alistair So. Rather, this service is about all of us. This service is about all the hallowed souls that have toiled and given their labors so that we can have what we have today. This service is a milestone for in our long road to a new All Hallows. Together, we will make our parish a place where all are welcome, and where our centuries-old tradition continues to meet the promises of God in our day. As the First Letter of Peter says, “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people...”

Beloved fellow pilgrims, together, we will find the way, the truth, and the life!

Amen.

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