

Packing for a Trip

Raisin and I will shortly begin our trip to Baltimore for the General Convention of The Episcopal Church. General Convention is the official decision-making body of the Church, meeting once every three years since 1789. Raisin is a Deputy from Iowa; I'm the First Alternate Deputy, ready to fill in if one of the four clergy Deputies take a break or test positive for COVID. As many in the wider church are still worried about the pandemic, we'll all be masked and tested daily. It will be less fun than the other five conventions we've attended.

We're planning to take some vacation time afterwards so we are driving rather than flying. That means we don't have to be so careful how we pack. Things normally we would leave behind we can throw in the trunk. And we can be sure that our luggage will arrive the same time we do.

The readings for this Sunday include two stories about packing for a trip. One is the Gospel that I just read, where seventy of Jesus' disciples were sent on a preaching mission. The other is the Old Testament story we heard about Naaman, the Syrian army commander who had leprosy and went to Israel in order to be cured by the prophet Elisha. Naaman is described as "a great man." He must have been rich, because he traveled with a huge retinue and packed a generous reward for his healer: ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten festal garments. Compare that with what Jesus' disciples were told what *not* to take: no purse, no bag, no sandals – and presumably no money, given that they were to depend on the good will of others for room and board.

The contrast couldn't be greater. Naaman exuded wealth and power. The disciples of Jesus had to embrace poverty. When Naaman was told to wash in the muddy Jordan River to be cured, he was furious. When the disciples of Jesus came back, they were filled with joy. Naaman was forced to humble himself before the power of the God of Israel. The seventy discovered that they were more powerful than the demons. Satan himself fell from heaven like a flash of lightning.

This could have been predicted. What one packs reveals one's priorities. Naaman with his military force expected everything to go his way. Ironically, it was people with almost nothing who effected his cure. A young Israeli slave tipped him off to Elisha's power. His own servants had to timidly approach their master and convince him to do what Elisha commanded. By contrast, the followers of Jesus who packed next to nothing carried the message that the kingdom of God had come near. That was enough to send the demons packing.

That's because the disciples carried the most important baggage inside of themselves. They carried the Holy Spirit. They bore one another's burdens. They relied entirely on God. It's unfortunate but not surprising that Christian faith is often deepest and most joyful among those who have the least. We who have so much are weighed down by the worries that come with many possessions. Like Naaman, we do not travel lightly.

I'll be thinking of that as I pack up the car for our trip. Unlike air travel there's plenty of room, so what difference does it make if I throw in something I might need? That may be okay for this type of travel. For the journey of faith, however, we need to pack like the disciples and rely only on Jesus Christ. That's the surest road to joy, to hope, and to eternal life.

[Pentecost 6: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.]