

“Here...”

Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 49:1-7

Reading from the Gospels: John 1:29-42

Earlier this year, we took a tour of the Capitol building, or should I clarify, a sanctioned tour of the Capitol building in DC. It wasn't my first tour, or even my second, but it was certainly the briefest. With the arrival of Covid and the additional security lockdown relating to the turmoil of January 6 of 2021, or what movie buffs might call the prequel to Brazil 2023, the Capitol was closed to the public for an extended period of time. Last March, it was once again opened for limited tours. Having never visited the newish Visitor's Center, we signed up when in DC visiting our son.

The grand hall of the visitor's center is impressive, and the video introduction to the building was informative. However, the tour itself was ... restrained. We put on our little headsets as our able tour guide ushered us up the steps to the rotunda, we circled the Rotunda, and we walked back downstairs — tour over. Now, don't get me wrong, the Rotunda is a magnificent space, and the stories shared about the architecture, the symbolism, and the statues were well crafted. But overall, the tour was somewhat like walking into our Narthex without being allowed to see the sanctuary. Seriously, our visit to the houses of Congress was limited to a

finger pointed down a hallway. *The Senate is somewhere over there, and the House of Representatives is somewhere down that way.* Perhaps one day, the People's house will be more comfortable with actual people, but with rage-fueled polarization and public health concerns, that time has not arrived yet. In the meantime, the engaging capitol tour guides will continue to artfully walk backwards while embellishing their brief tours with little known facts about the statues lining the Rotunda.

No matter the brevity of a tour, a gifted guide can bring to life the events, characters, curiosities, and mysteries of a place or landmark. Without a skilled guide I would have walked across Istanbul's hippodrome without taking notice of the obelisk standing at its center. Why, we have an obelisk in my hometown, dedicated for the Bicentennial back in '76, and the one in Istanbul is less than 1/5 the size of the Washington monument. However, our talented guide, whose Turkish name, Gunes, is literally translated, Sunshine, transformed what seemed commonplace into a font of mystery, intrigue, and wonder. The obelisk of Theodosius, which has stood in its current location since the 4th Century, was originally erected in Egypt during the reign of the Pharaoh, Thutmose III, some 3,500 years ago.

Sunshine could highlight the depiction of a chariot race, the submission of the barbarians, the hieroglyphs, and all this in addition to the impressive knowledge she conveyed so articulately at the Blue Mosque, the Hagia Sophia, and Topkapi Palace. A guide can reveal that what appears relatively mundane is actually breathtaking. Whether it's a park ranger pointing out the wildlife you'd never spy on your own, or the friend who can give you an insider's tour of a museum or ballpark, or a personal escort to usher you around some exotic foreign destination, a guide is indispensable to your experience.

How do they carry all that knowledge, trivia, and information in their heads? They study, they memorize, they take exams. Our own cherished servant leader, Mary Katheryne Zagora, was a Roadrunner at Mississippi State, the team of guides who serve as ambassadors for the university, giving campus tours to families and prospective students, offering insider information and excitement at high school *College Nights*. I believe, along with those who know Mary Katheryne, that there were a lot of students who made the decision to enroll at MSU, not because of something they read in a brochure, but because of the delightful encounter with an ebullient Mary Katheryne, who helped them experience the college as a place they could

feel comfortably at home, a college experience they would not want to miss. To be a Roadrunner, she had to take a semester length 3 credit hour course, memorize a ton of history, facts, and information, and pass a rigorous exam.

Armed with such knowledge and information, along with a passion for their subject, guides radically alter one's experience of a place or event. And just think, when you are fussing over a street map on vacation, how many family arguments would be quelled if some benevolent local spontaneously took the initiative to approach you: *You seem to be a little lost. Can I help point you in the right direction?*

“The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’”
“The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.” John was a tour guide. The author of John said as much in the previous chapter: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

John came to testify to the light, and he wasn't testifying just to hear the sound of his own voice. He spoke so that others would hear. He spoke so that our attention could be drawn toward that which we, so typically wrapped in our own concerns, could have simply missed. "Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." With these words, John is not just referring to the person of Jesus, but is also highlighting the purpose of Jesus - The lamb of God. Choir members often speak of it with the Latin: *Agnus Dei*. Biblically, the lamb symbolized purity, innocence. In light of Jesus' purpose, the lamb would, in taking upon itself all the suffering, estrangement, evil, and harm in the world upon itself, triumph over and free us from all that would estrange or separate us from God.

Given that we are limited, finite beings, trying to understand or relate to that which is infinite and eternal, our explanations of the nature of God's relationship with humanity will always be partial. Thus, over time there have been multiple interpretations of how Christ reconciled God and humanity, some more satisfactory than others, but all pointing to one ultimate truth — atonement, which is instructively broken down: at-one-ment — the reconciliation between a Sovereign God and a fallen world. Thus, in pointing to Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of

the world,” John is not only declaring God’s intention of reconciliation with us, he is also identifying the one through whom this occurs. “The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.”

John the Baptist is the ultimate tour guide. *You look a bit lost. Perhaps I can point you in the right direction. You’ve lost your bearings, you feel estranged, broken, judged, rootless, blinded by anger, resentment, bitterness, guilt, hate. I am not what you need, but I may be able to point you to the One who is.* John the Baptist couldn’t redeem or save a single soul, but he could point to the redeemer, sustainer, reconciler, grace giver.

John couldn’t heal, resolve, or disentangle that which twists us into knots, but he could point to a love unintimidated by our brokenness, a love that would walk through the fire with us, a love that breaks down the fear-erected walls that separate us. “Here is the lamb of God...” John the Baptist, here, gives us our job description. Hey, we’re not coaches with a dynamic game plan that will take us to victory village; we’re not CEOs with an innovative strategy that will take us to the promised land.

We're tour guides, hoping in all we do to point to the love that has already drawn us close, pointing to the Christ who redeems the broken, heals the tortured spirit, knits the torn fabric of relationship, glues the shattered community. We're not miracle workers; we're tour guides pointing to the miraculous love that refuses to let us go.

There is a marvelous multi-paneled, 16th-Century painting by Matthias Grunewald, known as the Isenheim Altarpiece (currently displayed in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, France). It was originally commissioned for the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim. Prominent in the central panel of the altarpiece is a depiction of Christ on the cross.

What is truly striking about the painting is the way Grunewald portrays the crucified Christ as covered with suppurating sores, a symptom of the plague that was devastating Europe in those days. You see, the monastery in Isenheim contained a hospice for plague victims, where they received the care of the monks and nuns. Daily, they would bring the patients in for prayer where the altarpiece stood. Imagine a patient seeing the crucified Christ taking upon himself the suffering of the world, indeed their own suffering, with Christ bearing their sores, their pain. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away all the brokenness of the world.

The Lord carries our burdens with us, bears all suffering with us. As the prophet perceived, “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases, yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

What a powerful witness to the limitless compassion of our Lord! But there’s more. Standing before the Christ, Grunewald painted a man holding in one hand the sacred text — the Torah, the prophets. His other arm is extended, and with an oversized, exaggerated forefinger, he is pointing to the Christ. (artsology.com) Now, we know John the Baptist was not physically present at the crucifixion. He had already been killed, beheaded by Herod, but Grunewald includes John the Baptist in the painting to symbolize our calling in all things to point to Jesus, to help others see a love that bears our pain, heals our brokenness, abides with all who suffer. “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

Speaking of John the Baptist, the author of the fourth gospel said, “He himself was not the light but came to testify to the light.” We are not the light, but by the grace of God we are called to bear witness to the light, to

point to the unfathomable grace and love of God in Jesus, just like John in Grunewald's portrayal of Christ's Passion. We are tour guides, pointing to the signs of grace all around us and ever with us.

I attended the memorial service on Friday for Paul Bartholomew, the father of our member Dave Bartholomew. Now, anyone here who knows Dave, Megan, Sam, Adam, and Elizabeth will tell you the immensity of their family's hospitality. A trip to the Bartholomew's is a salve for the spirit. Well, that spirit didn't just happen. It was inherited. Many of you are probably unaware of a mission organization based in Union County called JAARs. It is an aviation ministry that partners with Wycliffe Bible translators. Together they are dedicated to making scripture accessible to indigenous and marginalized populations in the remotest parts of the world and in their own language and dialect, or as one of Paul's daughters said at the service, "In their own heart language." The Bartholomews served in Peru for 22 years. Paul was a pilot and mechanic, with a larger than life personality and a love of making people laugh. Everyone who knew him had a humorous memory of him and spoke of him as a legend.

He was a joy to be around, but what truly defined him was a profound faith and a tireless spirit focused on pointing beyond himself to Christ, to

make the gospel truly accessible to the people the world so easily forgets or ignores. He was a tour guide, never wanting anyone to miss the signs of grace

We, too, are called to be tour guides, always pointing others to the signs of grace all around us. “He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” “...And as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God.’” With John, that is our call. Amen.