

Report on Sabbatic Leave, March 7- April 18, 2005
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I. Summary

As scheduled and planned for in consultation with the Vestry and the Bishop through the office of the Canon to the Ordinary, I began sabbatical leave on March 7 and returned to the parish on April 18, 2005, one-half of the customary sabbatical leave duration. During my absence the parish was very capably led by my clergy colleagues, the Rev. Mary Anne Osborn, Associate Rector, and the Rev. Alice Mindrum, Assistant Rector, along with the Wardens, Vestry, staff, and committee chairs. For the information of the parish, a previous, shorter version of this report was published in our monthly parish newsletter and on our parish Web site. This fuller version will be distributed to the Vestry and posted on the Web site.

I have been back in the parish for some three months now, still spiritually refreshed, full of new learning about stewardship, with fresh ideas about the various disputes that face the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, and with interesting and useful ideas about how our sisters churches at their best “do church.” I am very excited about sharing my new energy and ideas with the parish—and just about anyone else who will listen.

II. Holy Week observance, parish visits, family events

Throughout the sabbatical six weeks I continued my project of Sunday visits to churches that might in various ways be models for St. Paul's, to see how they “do church.” I visited St. Paul's, Norwalk; Christ Church, Greenwich; St. Bartholomew's, New York City; All Saints, Belmont, MA; and St. Luke's, Darien. Each church had something useful to teach me, and I have been sharing what I've learned with my clergy colleagues here, with the Wardens and Vestry, with various committees that carry out the major work of St. Paul's, and with visitors from other parishes who have inquired about how we do things at St. Paul's—insights ranging from hospitality to advertising and stewardship and adult education. I had an unforgettable Holy Week and Easter with the monks of Holy Cross Monastery, an Episcopal monastery in West Park, New York, on the Hudson River across from Poughkeepsie. We observed Holy Week mainly in silence. Keeping Holy Week in a monastic community is something I have wanted to do ever since I studied medieval drama as a graduate student forty years ago. Through their customary four prayer services each day, the monks and their guests participated in Jesus' Holy Week experiences with an intensity that is unsurpassed and unforgettable.

This sabbatical began on March 7, at the conclusion of what was (for me at least) a productive and enjoyable Vestry Retreat. As Linda continued her teaching at Fairfield University and as we awaited the imminent birth of our newest grandchild, I read some books and did some long-postponed chores around the Rectory. And watched a little basketball (go Huskies, sigh).

On March 22 Mae Ross Brockman arrived in New York City and Linda and I joyfully met her and congratulated son Nathan and daughter-in-law Anne on their beautiful daughter, grateful that all are well.

Reading

In the meanwhile I read some books that I had been looking forward to. One of them, Princeton Divinity School Professor Elaine Pagels' *Beyond Belief*, is a study of the intellectual and theological context that produced the non-canonical Gospel attributed to the Apostle Thomas and led to its rejection and suppression by the Church. That dispute, in the second through the fourth centuries, is quite strikingly comparable to the current controversy that besets the Episcopal Church. At issue is the question of whether individual Christians, or groups of Christians, believing themselves inspired by the Holy Spirit, can appropriately believe and practice something other than what the hierarchy of the Church officially prescribes. In the early Christian world, when persecution threatened the Church's very existence, the urge toward solidarity prevailed, and the institutional Church stifled the alternative voices, labeling them heretical.

One can see the dispute Pagels so richly describes as underlying the dispute a millennium later, when reformers like Martin Luther, convinced they were guided by the Holy Spirit in their reading of Scripture, refused to allow the hierarchy the defining last word, with the fracturing of the Church in the Protestant Reformation as the result. If our current disputes lead to a comparable re-division of the Church, it will be essentially for the same reason: a substantial group of believers are persuaded that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church into a truth that the rest of the Church have failed or refused to see.

Studying Pagels' research led me to take a follow-up week-long course this summer at Yale Divinity School in the New Testament Apocrypha. It was taught by the Dean of YDS, Harry Attridge, who as a direct result of our meeting will be coming to St. Paul's this winter to speak on that subject at one of our Sunday Forums.

I also read *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, by Steven Pinker, a cognitive scientist who is a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I found this to be one of the most important books I have read in decades, and one of the most engaging. It's beautifully and energetically written, with implications for theology no less than for social policy and intellectual understanding of the human condition.

Pinker shows that modern research into twins and related and unrelated siblings demonstrates that around fifty percent of our individual makeup is genetic, hardwired into our brains as it were. Of the environmental components that constitute the other fifty percent, and switch on or off elements of the inherited DNA component, the greater part is determined not by family or parenting, but by the peer groups we are part of as children and adolescents. (Arghhh. My mother was right again: it really does matter whom you hang out with, and my stubbornness, which I prefer to call my tenacity, is a direct gift from my grandfather.)

For theologians and law-makers, Pinker's most important argument may be his clarity about moral responsibility. We may be biologically inclined to act in a variety of self-interested ways, but that does not free us from the obligation to act morally and responsibly, and acting morally and responsibly includes ensuring that equal opportunity is a reality, not merely a slogan. Quoting Katherine Hepburn's character in *The African Queen*, Pinker says, "Human nature is what we're put on this earth to rise above." The book is the most convincing demonstration of the classic theological doctrine of original sin that I know of (although Pinker certainly does not use those terms). In the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas came to essentially the same conclusion about the power of astrological influences—like our genetics understood to be beyond our control.

During Holy Week I read an ancient Greek play by Euripides, *Alcestis*, with a brilliant introduction by its translator, William Arrowsmith. A friend had put me on to this play, knowing I would be drawn by its similarities to Shakespeare's late tragicomedies, *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale*. And so I was. The heroine, Alcestis, agrees to die in the place of her husband, after everyone else, including his aged parents, refuse. Her love and her husband's grief inspire the god Herakles to redeem Alcestis from Hades and turn tragedy into joy: an Easter experience. The entire play is rich in insight into what it means to be human. Think about it: if we were like gods and didn't die, morality would be pointless. The gods are, and for us Christians, God is, beyond morality. Mortality necessitates morality, as I like to put it.

Throughout the six weeks I read the collected poems—some 800 pages—of Czesław Miłosz, the Nobel laureate who died a couple of years ago. Even though much of his achievement as a poet is obscured to me because I am reading translations from his native Polish, I am interested in how his suffering under the Nazi regime during World War II and under the Communist regime after the war deepened his experience of Christian faith. His poetry is richly inventive, reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's in its intellectual range and depth, and it is strikingly fresh in its appreciation of the natural world. It turns out that Miłosz and the late Pope John Paul II knew each other as fellow Polish expatriates. Miłosz was for more than twenty years a member of the faculty at the University of California at Berkeley.

Preaching about stewardship, and the debate about Eucharist before Baptism

After Easter I spent a week in Washington, D.C., at the College of Preachers, located on the campus of the National (Episcopal) Cathedral—the site of President Regan's funeral a few months earlier. There I explored preaching about stewardship, and current thinking about Baptism and Holy Eucharist as the initiatory Sacraments of the Church—topics of current interest and controversy in our Episcopal Church.

My immersion in current preaching about stewardship at the College of Preachers precipitated what we called the "Grace Happens" event in this parish. This occurred on Pentecost, when everyone in the congregation received an envelope that had printed on the outside, "Grace Happens. Believe in it. Expect it. Respond to it."

Inside the envelope were a letter (a copy is attached to this memorandum)—and a \$20 bill. Every adult, child, and infant in the congregation received an envelope and letter and twenty-dollar bill. The letter invites the recipients to use the occasion to reflect on God's blessings and how respond to those blessings, particularly the money we are entrusted with; to use the \$20 in whatever way they might wish, but to report in the context of our September stewardship campaign on how they utilized it and what their thinking was in doing so.

A parish in New Jersey inspired this idea, and I am hoping that it will serve as a springboard to enliven our stewardship awareness and commitment. It has certainly sparked a lot of conversation!

Conclusion

All in all, it was a richly productive and restorative half-sabbatical of six weeks, and I am grateful to the parish and to the diocese for allowing me the freedom to pursue these opportunities for study, spiritual enrichment, professional development, and family nurturing. And I am likewise grateful to the clergy and lay leaders of St. Paul's who kept things thriving in the parish during my absence.