

Sermon by the Reverend William J. Eakins
St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
August 19, 2018

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14
Psalm 111
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58

It was some years ago that I first heard a story of someone getting on the wrong airplane and ending up in the wrong city. The benighted passenger boarded a plane in New York City intending to go to St. Louis, and was surprised when he landed to find himself in San Francisco. Airline personnel were baffled and embarrassed that such a mistake could be made. Until recently, I would have assumed that with today's post 9/11 security measures, such a misadventure would be impossible. However, when I looked on the Internet this week, I was amazed to learn that people boarding the wrong plane and getting off in a strange place is still happening. All it takes is a perfect storm of passenger and personnel error, and folks end up arriving where they did not set out to arrive.

And putting airplane journeys aside, it is abundantly clear that every day there are people who find themselves in places, problems and predicaments where they had no intention of finding themselves. Who has ever set out to become bankrupt, divorced, a drug addict, an alcoholic, a moral reprobate or a resentful grump? Sometimes people find themselves in bad circumstances through forces beyond their control. But we often end up in life where we do because we make bad choices, wittingly or unwittingly, that lead us on paths or to destinations for which we never set out.

Take, for example, the 300 child-abusing priests in Pennsylvania who have been so much in the news this past week. I imagine that when these men went off to seminary, they wanted to be good priests who would faithfully serve God and God's people. How could their vocations go so wrong? Were they badly influenced by the culture of their seminaries and by their fellow clergy? Were they unfit in the first place for priestly life? Perhaps. Nonetheless, we cannot absolve these priests from responsibility for their actions. Somewhere along the line they made choices that they knew were wrong in order to indulge their personal desires. They probably then lied to themselves about what they were doing, justifying their behavior by saying they were really only showing their affection for the children they were molesting. A career of selfish wrongdoing, self-deception, and cover-up was begun, a priestly vocation corrupted, and untold damage done to the emotional and spiritual lives of the victims and a multitude of others.

St. Paul's warning in his letter to the Christians of Ephesus is timely. "Be careful," Paul says, "how you live, not as unwise people but as wise." What you do, what you say, the decisions that you make—all of these matter; they have consequences. So be alert and be wise about what is at stake as you make choices.

The first step toward acquiring the kind of wisdom Paul talks about is knowing that we have the power to make choices. We are not robots pre-programmed to behave in certain ways; we are never helpless victims. One of our distinct privileges as human beings, one of the signs that we are made in the image of God, is that we are capable of deliberate, rational, moral choice. Our choices can take us on the way that leads toward God or on the way that leads from God, on the path of righteousness or on the path of sin. To be wise is to recognize that this is the reality in which we live, and to be alert.

That life is a complicated web in which good is never too far removed from the possibility of evil, the sublime only a step or two away from the ridiculous, the lofty a hope or skip from the banal, is brought home by using the Internet. A recent study has found that no subject on the Internet is more than 19 clicks away from any other. Take, for example, the web site for Martha Stewart, which provides the domestic diva's tips on everything from crafts to cooking. Six clicks away and one arrives at the British Columbia Killer Whale Adoption Program, where readers are encouraged to adopt an orca. If you turn to the website for British Carmelite nuns, the home page

reads, "Welcome: The sisters promise you prayers for you and your needs, whoever you may be." A mere five clicks away on a succession of linked sites will lead you to an order form for an erotic DVD.

Be careful then how you live. Every click of the mouse will take you somewhere; every choice you make will lead you either closer to God and to God's plan for your life, or another direction. "So do not be foolish," St. Paul continues, "but understand what the will of the Lord is." Now that is no small task; it is the work of a Christian's lifetime. But as one Christian pilgrim to another, here are some basic guidelines.

First, always remember who you are and where you are supposed to be headed. If the benighted traveler of my opening story had looked at his ticket and paid more attention to the signs around him, he would not have arrived in San Francisco rather than St. Louis. Pay attention to what it says on your ticket as a Christian. Remember that in Holy Baptism you have been marked as a beloved child of God, one for whom Christ died and rose from the dead. Remember that in Holy Communion you have been fed with the Bread of Life. Remember that you have been called to bear the Good News of God's love to the world around you. Remember that you are bound for the heavenly city, the place where all God's children will feast forever in peace and unity. Do not be misled.

Second, get all the help you can from your fellow travelers. If the man on the wrong flight had only asked others, he would not have gotten on the wrong plane. How much we Christian wayfarers need one another so that we can live wisely and not as fools. We need to hear over and over again the words of Scripture, the wisdom of God's people of ages past. We also need the prayers and we need the advice and encouragement of present-day Christians to help us find the right path and stay on it. And we need to hear and to heed the warnings of others when we have lost the way.

And finally, we need again and again to correct our course when we have made wrong choices and have lost our bearings. If the benighted traveler on the wrong plane had looked out the window and seen the Rockies, he would have known he was not heading for St. Louis. He would, however, still have ended up in San Francisco. The plane would not have turned around because one person made a mistake. Thank God, however, that we always have the opportunity to change course and amend our lives. It is never too late to acknowledge our mistakes, to be forgiven and to get headed in the right direction.