Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - January 29, 2017 Sermon

Heaven Opened By Bagpipes, Bridges, Trains, And Flying Cars
Our Heritage to Blessedness
Psalm 67, John 1:43-51

The coldest winter I ever spent was last summer in Scotland.

OK, OK, that's not original to me. You may have heard that Mark Twain said it about San Francisco, only a little internet sleuthing will reveal that Mark Twain never said it about San Francisco. Actually he was borrowing a line from someone else—one Horace Walpole (1717-1797), the Earl of Orford, who was borrowing the line from someone else, one James Quin (1693-1766), an English Shakespearean actor, who killed two rival actors, one in a duel one in a fit of pique and who was complaining about the cold summer in London. But Twain (1835-1910) borrowed the line from Quin via Walpole to complain about the cold summer not in San Francisco but in Paris. Twain clearly had some history with Paris. He quotes the line in a letter to a friend shortly after spending the summer of 1879 in Paris. And then he adds:

"Paris the cold, Paris the drizzly, Paris the rainy, Paris the Damnable. Let us change the proverb; let us say all bad Americans go to Paris when they die. No let us not say it; for this adds a new horror to immortality."

In his journal, Twain extended his judgment from Paris to all of France:

"France has neither winter nor summer nor morals—apart from those drawbacks it is a fine country."

Which you have to admit is a pretty good line—better than the one he never said about San Francisco, and one that captures the way many Americans feel about France, or San Fransisco, too, for that matter.

Don't ask me to explain how the quote got changed to San Francisco and misattributed to Twain—some things surpass all knowing.

All of which may capture the way many Americans feel about history, the past, and our heritage: same old, same old: lots of names and dates, confused and confusing, mistaken, biased, and judgmental—with more than a whiff of violence and death, not to mention the question of eternal damnation, hanging over all of it—and much of it surpassing all knowing.

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" I think we Americans have a similar skepticism not towards Nazareth but towards the past, southerners perhaps being the lone exception, and even them not so much anymore. The past is a foreign county—and we don't want to go there.

Which is not to say that the bagpipes, drums, banners, and tartans aren't wonderful symbols of our heritage—they are—which brings me back to last summer in Scotland.

We—we being the Knox Choir (thirty-six 7th-12th graders) plus adult advisors—were on the bus, on our way to a place called Glenfinnan, which is way way up in the Western Highlands of Scotland. It was July, so of course the weather was miserable. Scotland the cold, Scotland the drizzly, Scotland the rainy . . . Let us change the proverb; let us say all bad American Presbyterians go to Scotland when they die—and

an unlucky few experience the horror beforehand." OK, that's just how I was feeling when we got on the bus that morning. But once I got there, once I got to Glenfinnan, everything changed.

First, there's the monument: it's a tower more than 60 feet high, and on top is a statue of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, also known as "Bonnie Prince Charlie." He was the grandson of James II, king of Great Britain, who had been deposed—kicked off the throne, and out of the country (he goes to France of course)—in 1688. But some 57 years later, his grandson, Bonnie Prince Charlie, sails from France with a small army and lands at Glenfinnan, where, on August 9, 1745 he raises the Royal Standard—a banner much like these—to claim the throne in the name of his father and grandfather. Needless to say, George II, the current occupant of that same throne, is not amused. Charles, however, has a plan: to join his army with that of various Highland clans, and then march on England. And for a little while it looks like it might work: some of the Highland clans do join him. (Some, but by no means all: the Highland clans never were—and never will be—of one mind about anything.) They meander around Scotland a while, winning a few fierce battles against troops loyal to George II, but then they begin to lose and lose badly (Charles is no great military strategist), meeting their final defeat at the Battle of Culloden Moor on April 16,1746.

There's a number of famous Scottish ballads about all this because that's what the Scots do: fight fierce battles and then sing ballads about them—for centuries. Scotland the Brave.

Anyway, Charles hides in the Highlands for about five months, before finding safe passage back to France. And after that, he wanders around Continental Europe for the rest of his life (he dies in 1788), an increasingly pathetic figure: mostly in his cups, taking several mistresses, and having his portrait made time and time again, always bedecked in Scottish tartans.

Now here's the reason that all this matters to us at Westminster today: after Charles' defeat, the Highlands were subject to a "savage campaign of reprisals and suppression designed to destroy the clans." Central to this campaign was the Dress Act of 1746, drafted and passed by one, Lord Chancellor Hardwicke. The Dress Act of 1746 reads:

No one within that part of Great Britain called Scotland, shall, on any pretence whatsoever wear or put on the Clothes commonly called Highland Clothes (that is to say) the Plaid, Philabeg, little Kilt, or Shoulder Belts, and further no Tartan, or party-coloured Plaid shall be worn as part of any dress or coat. First offense six months' imprisonment without bail; second offense: the offender "shall be liable to be transported to any of His Majesty's Dominions beyond the Seas, there to remain for the space of Seven Years."

That's right; Many of you today are in violation of the Dress Act of 1746. And that part about being transported to "His Majesty's Dominions beyond the seas," you know where that means in 1746, don't you? Yes, that's right: some of you are here today because your great, great great etc. grandfather was caught wearing tartan—twice.

But given this suppression, how then did the monument ever get built? Well, the Dress Act was finally repealed in 1788, and by the early 19th-century, under the influence of Sir Walter Scott in particular (Bonnie Prince Charlie shows up in Scott's novel, *Waverly*), and of European Romanticism in general, there's a great revival of interest in all things Scottish—traditions, poetry and stories, the Gaelic language, Scottish landscapes and Scottish history. So in 1815, a flamboyant young Scottish aristocrat named Alexander MacDonald commissions the building of the monument. "Flamboyant" is an understatement: MacDonald employed his own full-time, personal bagpiper, decked out in kilt and tartan, to pipe him in and out wherever he went; he also died at age 28 in debt to the tune of 32,000 pounds or about 7 million dollars in today's terms.

But it's not just the Glenfinnan monument, it's also the Glenfinnan viaduct. Built in the 1890's, the Glennfinnan viaduct is a railway bridge, over four football fields long, curving the whole way, it stands at a height of 100 feet above the ground, with no less than 21 arches. Part of the Western Highland Railway line, the viaduct was designed to provide the most striking view of the monument, and correspondingly, the top of the monument provides best view of the viaduct. It's an engineering marvel, the work of one Robert McAlpine, "Concrete Bob" he was affectionately called because of his affection for concrete. (The Scots are proud of their engineers; they're public figures, celebrities, really, there's even a Scottish Engineering Hall of Fame.) Anyway the train that runs on the line across the Glenfinnan vie-a-duct, is a beautiful old-fashioned steam-engine train called the Jack-o-bite Express, since sympathizers with King James and his descendants were known as "Jacobites."

And in addition to the monument and the viaduct, there's the landscape, which I haven't even mentioned, and which is equally spectacular and equally Scottish: the mountains running right down into the the loch (the Gaelic word for lake or sea inlet)—all green in the mist. *High in the misty Highlands, Out by the purple islands, Land of the shining river, Land of my heart for ever, Scotland the brave.*

And yet for all that—Bonnie Prince Charlie, the monument, the viaduct, the landscape—for all that—we would not have been going to Glenfinnan that day were it not for a young mother, recently divorced, depressed, grieving the death of her mother, sitting in cafes in London in the early 1990's writing, writing, writing—writing because she would not give up on her dream—her vision, really—a vision that first came to her years earlier during a four-hour delay on a train trip from Manchester to London, a vision of a young boy attending a school of wizardry. The young mother, one Joanne Rolling, would soon become known world-wide as J.K. Rolling, the boy as Harry Potter, the school, as Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and the train to get there, the Hogwart's Express. And when it came time to make the movies . . . well, where else would you go to shoot the train scenes, but to the Jacobite Express crossing the Glenfinnan viaduct? Except that in The Chamber of Secrets Harry and Ron miss the train. So they take off in Mr. Weasley's car—Mr. Weasley's flying car—a light blue 1962 Ford Anglia 105E Deluxe—in pursuit of the train, and when they find it, they almost get run over by it—on the Glenfinnan vie-a-duct of course—escaping only be flying off the tracks and under one of those 21 arches (I mean, when you see those 21 arches, don't you just want to fly a car under one of them?). And then at last, when they fly into Hogwart's, Ron turns to Harry and says, "Welcome Home, Harry," whereupon they fly straight into the Whomping Willow, and get whomped. Similarly, Bonnie Prince Charlie, upon landing in Scotland, declared, "I am home," and got whomped.

So there I was, having gotten off the bus, walking back from the monument towards the Visitor's Center: I could see the plume of white smoke—I could hear the chugging—of the Jacobite/a.k.a. Hogwart's Express approaching. And as I looked up, I thought of the marvelous convergence of events, people, and circumstances that led to all this, being there at that moment—to me, to us, being there at that moment. I mean really, when Bonnie Prince Charlie landed in 1745, all he could imagine was being the King of England, but compared to all this, that's nothing. So, as I stood there, looking up, wondering at all of this . . . well, if I had one word to express what I was feeling at that moment, that word would be "cold." And if I had two more words, they would be "and wet." Scotland the cold, Scotland the drizzly . . .

But when I got back inside the Visitor's Center, warmed by hot tea and a scone, I realized that this was our heritage, not just our Scottish heritage, but our human heritage. Because in every human situation, in every human moment, there is a similarly marvelous convergence of events, people, and circumstances, with a similar heritage of courage and constancy, folly and weakness, daring and creativity, bigotry and stupidity, ingenuity and imagination, song and longing, wanderlust and homesickness, heartbreak and joy, the deepest love and the most inveterate hatred, shared endeavor and vicious warfare, defeat and renewal, natural beauty and natural danger, ambition, vision, generosity, dumb luck, pure pluck, and so so much more. It's just that in the Highlands in general, and at Glenfinnan in parti-

cular, it’s so dramatic that you can’t help but see it.

If our past, our heritage, is our Nazareth, then something good—much great good, in fact—can come out of it. But this can be true only if God is at work in human history, if heaven has opened up and is blessing us. Only If God so loved the world that he sent his only son not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him, only then we can trust that God is still at work in the world, in human history, through the Holy Spirit and the way the Spirit inspires human beings, producing great good here. But if not, if God has abandoned the world, then it is the same old, same old: confused and confusing, mistaken, biased, and judgmental—with more than a whiff of violence and death, not to mention the question of eternal damnation, hanging over all of it—and much of it surpassing all knowing. If something good can come out of Nazareth, out of our history and all human history, in our day and in every day, it’s only because something good came out of Nazareth in Nathanael’s day—and Nathanael had the good grace to see it and to say it.

Our heritage is not just bagpipes, banners, and tartans, although, for some of us, they are stirring symbols of our heritage. Nor is our heritage just the same old, same old. This is our heritage: “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man”—this is our heritage, our blessing, and our hope.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.