

DESTINATION: FAITH!

The United Kingdom (New Perspectives)

August 12, 2007

Wow... it seems like a long time since I've been here in the pulpit to preach, doesn't it?

- I've been doing a lot of traveling this summer, so I thought it would be appropriate to start a new 4-week sermon series titled: 'DESTINATION: FAITH!'
 - Each week over the next month, we'll be traveling vicariously to different locations around the globe...
 - This morning's destination is The United Kingdom... (and you don't even need to spend the 17 hours of travel time to get there!).
- But before we head across the seas... let's pray together...
 - *"Lord, may the words of my mouth & the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight... for You are our Rock and our Redeemer! AMEN."*

Nine years ago, my wife, Jody, and I had the privilege of participating in a pulpit exchange with Rev. Keith Rushton & his wife, Heather .

- We went over to England and preached at his church (Lorton Street Methodist Church in Cockermouth)... and he came and preached at Hilo UMC on the Big Island.
 - We stayed in their house & drove their car (on the wrong side of the road!)... while they did the same with ours!
 - Emily and Ezra were very young (just 8 months & 3½ years, respectively), so they stayed home with Grandma & Grandpa.
- This summer, we had the chance to go back to England, and the Lake District, and participate in another one-month pulpit exchange...
 - But instead of the Rushtons coming here... they stayed in Cumbria, and Rev. Graeme Dutton took my place in the Aiea pulpit.
- Today's message is not going to be a travelogue... we me trying to show you the 1,108 photos that we came back with...

- Instead, I'm going to lift up 5 types of experiences we had, and how God spoke to me through those places...
- I came back with **New Perspectives** from my month in the UK... I pray that God might speak to you, this morning, as we journey along together.

I have to start with the GARDENS... one of the things that we remembered most about our previous trip to the UK, is that the English love their gardens!

- People take pride in small gardens they cultivate in their yards...
 - One Sunday afternoon, we had the chance to go for a walk outside the small village of Blindcrake.
 - Mary Stocks was our guide... for she lives in the town of Blindcrake.
 - You'll hear more about the walk in another section, but when we were finished, we went back to her house for 'tea and scones'...
 - And she showed us her garden! This is just a portion of what her backyard looks like...
 - In fact, gardens are so important to the Brits, that they even have competitions among the various nearby villages as to whose town has the best gardens!
- Wherever you go in England, there are plenty of public parks... this is a picture from Regent's Park in London...
 - The English frequent their parks quite... well, frequently!
 - Morning... lunchtime... afternoon & evening... there are always people spending time in the parks...
 - They talk, read, play, nap... & sometimes just sit and look at the beautiful flowers!
 - In England, gardens are gathering spots... they're places to connect with others ... and with the beauty of God's creation!
 - If you look really close, you should be able to see a bee on this flower...
 - If that was kind of hard for you to see... can you see the bee in this flower?!?
 - I wonder... how often we, who live in this amazing place called Hawaii, take the time to recognize the beauty that's all around us?

- Another aspect of English gardens that I absolutely LOVED was the creativity that went into so many of them!
 - If it was up to me to plant a garden, I'd probably just grab a bagful of seeds... and in fine 'biblical tradition' simply fling them far and wide, and hope that some of them grow up to be flowers!
 - Then there are places like this... Levens Hall up in North England... this takes "creativity" into new levels...
 - Levens Hall has one of the foremost topiary gardens in all the world.
 - This place oozes with inspiration & creativity! Look at what can be done, when someone has a vision & passion!
 - What a wonderful testament to us, as Christians... God has blessed each of us with a gift... for some it may be working with plants & flowers, for others, like me... it's definitely something else!
 - But each of us was created by the Creator of everything in this amazing world... and we are inheritors of that creativity!

The second area that spoke to me during my time in England, were the CASTLES!

- Edinburgh castle in Scotland was one of the few "working castles" that we visited on our trip...
 - Amongst other things, it holds Scotland's "crown jewels"... the symbols of their ancient monarchy...
 - And every day at 1pm, they fire a gunshot over the city!
- But most of the castles we visited were simply ruins... like Conwy castle in Wales... this was one of Edward I's coastal strongholds...
 - Just a few miles up the road is the beautiful Beaumaris castle... with its majestic moat...
 - We also had the chance to visit quaint Barnard Castle in Northeast England... situated alongside a river in a tiny town, it was quite engaging to visit.

- Every castle we visited had a history... and a bit of mystery, as well. We learned about the importance it once had... and our minds were free to wonder what it might have looked like in all its splendor.
- The day we traveled through Wales, we stopped at 4 castles... this was our last stop, Dolwyddelan Castle...
 - Nestled up in the mountains, this was no coastal castle...
 - We arrived late in the afternoon... and were practically the only ones here at the time.
 - It was about a 10 minute walk from the parking lot... and here you see the last stretch of the journey.
 - Ezra & Emily raced ahead, and made it inside first... then quickly up onto the rooftop.
 - When Jody and I finally met up with them, Ezra exclaimed... “Ah, this castle is junk – all it has is a view, and no gift shop!”
 - He was right about the view!
- The Bible frequently speaks of God as like a castle... it uses language such as “stronghold,” “fortress,” “our rock in whom we trust.”
 - Written in times when people felt especially vulnerable and exposed, castle and fortress imagery was comforting...
 - Knowing that even more than any wall or stronghold that humankind could create, God could provide refuge, cover & protection was quite compelling.
 - I wonder if we, in our modern-day homes with security alarms & motion sensors, have forgotten what it means to place ourselves firmly & securely in God’s hands?
 - How would our lives be if we trusted in God alone to be our fortress & our stronghold?

Believe it or not, SHEEP became an important component of my spiritual learning in England...

- Once you get out of the big cities, just about every place you travel, you’ll see sheep dotting the countryside.

- It's kind of neat for us Hawaii folk... because sheep just aren't part of our daily lives.
- When we were driving in Wales, some of the sheep even "escaped" from their fencing and started cruising the streets.
- To the untrained eye, it's easy to think that all sheep look the same... we sort of did...
- Until we visited the Lakeland Sheep & Wool Centre.
 - They did an amazing job of placing 19 pure-bred British sheep... and not only showing us the differences between them... but explaining what they were primarily known for.
 - Let's see if you can tell the difference between the Swaledale...
 - ...and a Ryland? (this is one of my favorites!)
 - Can you differentiate between a Hebridean...
 - ... and a Wiltshire Horn?
 - And then there's the Leicester Longwool... it's sort of in a class all by itself, don't you think!?!)
 - I was reminded again of the incredible diversity of God's creation... and how often in Scripture we are referred to as God's "flock."
- One of the things we noticed early on was that most of the sheep had some kind of coloring on them... like the red paint splotches you see here...
 - It turns out that the sheep owners mark their sheep, so they won't be confused with other flocks...
 - We saw various colors (with red being by far the most common!)... but also various types of markings: one line, two lines, circles, two separate colors, etc.
 - We even saw a few shepherds, from time to time, as they cared for their sheep... and the wonderful sheep dogs that helped keep the sheep in line!
 - One of the most famous passages in all the Bible, Psalm 23, reminds us that "the Lord is our shepherd!"
- I had the unexpected opportunity to play the role of a shepherd one afternoon... it was the day we hiked with Mary Stocks at Blindcrake...

- Near the end of the hike we passed a particular flock of sheep grazing...
- I noticed that one of the sheep was lying on its back, stretching out its legs... and it reminded me of how our dog, Kula, does this lazy-kind of stretch every morning or so...
- Well, I remarked to Ezra how funny it looked... Mary overheard us, and said that it's actually quite dangerous.
- You see, when sheep roll onto their backs, and are so heavy-laden with wool... it's often impossible for them to get back up... and over time, they'll struggle and struggle to right themselves... but might actually die, without help.
- So I climbed up over the loose stone wall... walked cautiously over to this upside-down sheep... and with all the pastoral care I could muster, TIPPED it back up on its feet!
 - It scrambled away to join its buddies... (without even so much as a 'thank you!')
- In so many ways, sheep are such great metaphor for us as Christians...
 - Our identity comes from our Shepherd...
 - We're marked at our baptism with the sign of the cross (and hopefully everyone will know whose we are)!
 - And of course, we tend to wander & stray outside our boundaries... so we need to be watched over by the Great Shepherd!

CATHEDRALS were other places that... (Surprise! Surprise!)... spoke to me while we were overseas...

- More than anything else, cathedrals evoke a sense of the grandeur & majesty of God...
 - It was a strange juxtaposition... for I found myself feeling, at times, quite small and insignificant...
 - And at other times... filled with wonder and awe.
- Stained glass windows are also quite evocative in English cathedrals...
 - Without using words, they tell stories of the faith... stories from scripture and stories from the history of the church.

- There were quite a few elements of art found inside the cathedrals... this altar parament was taken from Revelation 22:1 – which speaks about the waters of LIFE flowing from the throne of God.
 - I think the church can always use more expressions of art!
- One of the byproducts of having such HUGE worship spaces... is the opportunity to set up little side chapels all throughout the cathedral.
 - This particular one was in the Abbey in Bath... but they were present in just about every cathedral we visited!
 - They were places of prayer & quiet reflection...
 - And they reminded me that worship is something that can take place 24 hours a day...
 - You don't have to wait for an "official worship service" on Sunday mornings to commune with God... just find a side chapel, and these massive cathedrals are suddenly quite intimate & cozy.

Finally, I'd like to tell you about something Jody and I did together towards the very end of our time in the Lake District... we took a 3-hour WALK around Buttermere!

- Here's a map of a portion of the Lake District... the city of Cockermouth (where we were staying) is located at the top.
 - Six or seven of the lakes are visible in this photo... and you'll see towards the bottom, the lake known as Buttermere.
 - I had wanted to take a walk around one of the lakes, but we never found the time to do it.
 - On our last Friday in Cockermouth, Jody and I ventured out around 5pm for a leisurely stroll around the lake (as you can see, July in England is a bit colder than July in Hawaii!)
- I'm not going to say much about this endeavor... except that it was one of my "top 5" experiences of our month in the UK.
 - Why? Well, for starters... there was incredible beauty out there on and around that lake...

- But also, because of the time that Jody and I had to be together... we talked... held hands... talked some more... and really enjoyed being out in creation together.
- In these next few moments of quiet, here's a glimpse of a portion of what we experienced as we walked...
- Friends, even pastors need to be reminded that GOD longs to spend this kind of time with us!
 - *(pause)* How long has it been since you and God have 'taken a walk around Buttermere'?
 - Whether it's gazing out at the beauty of creation all around us...
 - Or spending a few moments in our day praying or reading the Bible... God desperately wants to spend time with us.
 - We're usually just too busy to stop and notice.
 - I encourage you to make a point today and everyday... to open yourself to the life-giving presence of God...
 - You have no idea how much your soul needs it!

Let us pray... ***“Gentle God, thank you for this amazing world that you have blessed us with. You speak to us in so many ways... through the intricacy of gardens... the grandeur of castles... the peculiarity of sheep... the majesty of cathedrals... and the intimacy of time spent alone with You. If we've been distant, Lord, help us find our way back to You. So that when we are aware of your constant presence with us, we might truly be grateful. In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN!”***