

## **“I Will Never Leave You”**

**Year C, Proper 17 – Hebrews 13:1-8**

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul’s, Henderson, August 28, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

About this time of year back in 2010, I had just finished being part of the summer mission trip from Trinity Church in Columbus, Georgia to build a church in Belize. I’ll get back to your paradise vision of Belize in a moment. But the destination of our mission team, mainly a group of youth, but also a really hard-working gang of adults who were self-selected less as chaperones and more for their ability to mix concrete and lay cinder blocks, was the very un-touristy, very poor village of Hopkins, in the southern, Stan Creek district of the little country that, until it was granted independence in 1981, was known as British Honduras. The kids (and adults) did great through a week of really hard workdays, afternoons interacting with the Garifuna children of Hopkins, and singing into the night with our hosts around a campfire on the beach. By the end of the week, we were still missing the roof, but we worshiped with the community (and local dignitaries – it was a big deal) within the four walls of the first church building Hopkins had ever had.

So it was that I was very proud of our kids a couple of days later as I waved good-bye to them at the airport in Belize City. But as soon as they were headed homeward, I headed to the harbor to catch a two-hour water taxi ride north thru the cerulean waters of the western Caribbean to the considerably more touristy town of San Pedro on Ambergris Caye. Rather than going straight home, I had made arrangements to stay a couple of extra days at a little hotel of the beach run by the family of a big fella that I only ever knew as Patojo. San Pedro was, and no doubt still is, a bit *too* touristy for my taste, but the real reason for my little side trip was that Patojo was, and probably still is, a certified scuba dive-master offering a two-day diving experience for people like me who had never done such a thing before.

I met Patojo himself for the first time the next morning on the hotel’s dock, when I discovered that, due to the flagging economy in 2010, I was the *only* member of his resort dive experience that day. Though I suspect that was a blow to the family’s economy, the one-on-one attention suited me just fine and the sit-down portion of the instruction on equipment, procedures, and safety went easily with my instructor sitting with me almost literally face-to-face. We then did pretty much the exact same class in the hotel’s pool and I got my first taste of mouth breathing from a tank of air.

After a handful of drills to make sure I knew what to do in case of emergencies, I got two thumbs up from the big man and we returned to his dive shop out on the pier. “Are you ready to go see some fish?” Patojo asked, and I suspect my grin saved any verbal reply. One of his daughters readied a small skiff while Patojo and I set up fresh air tanks and we were off to the Mezo-American Reef which sits only a couple hundred yards off that part of Belize. We used the anchor bouy at San Pedro Canyon, and Patojo and I backed over the side of the boat for my first dive. It was everything I had hoped for, like swimming in the 90-gallon aquarium! The sheer quantity of beautiful things to see was overwhelming, nurse sharks, and spotted eagle rays, whole *schools* of some of the fish I had at home, and corals as far as my eyes could see.

Soon I was swimming along, moving weightlessly from outcropping to outcropping, until I realized that the one thing I did not see... was Patojo. Now vision in a dive mask is limited to a few degrees to the front, but as I looked quickly to my right, and twice as quickly to my left, it looked like I had been so caught up in the beauty around me, so caught up in the experience of freedom, that I had actually outrun my partner. In spite of earlier instruction to do no such thing, I was nearly panicked as I twisted my whole body from side to side, probably using more air from my tank in a matter of seconds than I should have used in half an hour, afraid that I was lost, that I might drowned, right here in the middle of paradise.

Then I felt a tap from above my left shoulder and turned to find Patojo right there. I faced him, but looked again from side to side at the enormity of the space around us. Patojo waved to get my full attention, and signaled that I should look at him. My breathing returned to normal – or as normal as breathing gets at thirty-five feet under water – my instructor asked if everything was alright again, and signaled that I should go back to looking at the wonder of the world we were visiting.

We spend a good deal of our lives, don't we, gulping every breath as if it is our last. We try to move forward, but in fear and despair we just can't manage to move. Or we go swimming through the canyons at breakneck speed, terrified that if we incline to the right or to the left – if we slow down to take in the wonder, even for a single second, we will be lost – and drowned – and *darned*. We are more than just afraid for our lives – we are afraid for our very *souls*. Afraid we won't measure up somehow. Afraid we will fail to live up to some standard that we have set, or that we have bought into. Afraid we will get off the track of God's purpose for our lives. We spend a good deal of our lives terrified that we won't perform well enough, that we'll "mess up," that we just plain aren't good enough.

But tucked into this morning's lesson from the letter to the Hebrews is a reminder that life is not a matter of skill. It's not a matter of ability. It's not a matter of effort. Life, most especially the *Christian* life, is a matter of *trust*. In the midst of all our fear and trembling, our Father is right beside us, holding on to us and whispering, "I will never leave you or forsake you." It's not a matter of our own adequacy or inadequacy. It's a matter of trusting that our Father is with us.

The problem is we're not particularly good with trust. One of the handful of things that I learned as a student of psychology years and years ago is that science has figured out that we as human beings have a mind that was *designed* to trust. Back in school we called it evolutionary psychology. I've come to prefer calling it being made in the Image of God. In any case, we are apparently born hard-wired to trust.

The problem is that from the moment of our birth, our software, our programming, the patterns that we develop as we grow up and live our lives, point us in precisely the *opposite* direction. Over the course of our lives, we trust in others over and over, only to be let down time and time again. We know that in our spiritual lives, in the deepest part of our selves, we have been the one to walk away from the very one who has brought us into freedom. Time after time, failure after failure, betrayed by others, and betraying others, we wander away from each other, and we wander away from our Savior.

And yet, the Father proclaims, "I will never leave you or forsake you." "Every step you took on the path, I was there." "Every time you *left* the path, I was there, too." "You may think you are leaving me, but I will *never* leave you." "Though time itself dissolve back into the nothingness from which I formed it, I will *never* forsake you." "From the beginning, you are mine." "And to the absolute end of ends, I am yours."

We need *not* live lives of loneliness. We need *not* live lives of despair. We need *not* live lives of fear. Our God is ready to hold us up through *whatever* comes. Our Lord is willing to give himself to us time and time and *time* again. Our Father is able to keep his promise that he will *never* leave us, that he will *never* forsake us. And so we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can *anyone* do to me?"

It's just that simple. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. It's nothing but a certain fact.