What I Did on Sabbatical
Sermon Preached for St. Stephen's
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Three months is a long time to be away, and a lot to summarize in a "what I did on Sabbatical" sermon - but this time away was an investment in our ministry together and I want to share some of what I've gained through it.

First and maybe most important - I had unrushed time to spend with my family. There's a quality to that kind of slow time that's richer and more profound in its ease and slower pace. Perhaps my perspective is a bit skewed on this - having only one day a week off in common with my family for more than two decades - but the down time spent together mattered more than I can articulate.

From our parish 'Where's Waldo' display about my time in Scotland - you know about my time in Edinburgh and Stirling with Mackenzie. And the two weeks of vacation with Ken when he came over at the end of my time in Aberdeen. But I also squeezed in two days with Channing at the end of her surgical rotation. And spent a week with my sister. I visited my dad who is well and happy, and was thrilled to see me. It was good to be reminded how valuable the interstitial moments are - those quiet nothing times that bind us together with those we love.

The core of my sabbatical time - which is also depicted on the "Where's Waldo board" - was the five weeks I spent serving in a small way, in the Diocese of Aberdeen and the Orkneys. The Scottish Episcopal Church is our closest theological neighbor in the Anglican Communion, and Aberdeen features in our shared history.

A little history lesson - in 1689 King James II of England was deposed and William and Mary were placed on the English throne. It's more complicated than we have time for, but for our purposes - those who refused to take an oath of allegiance to William and Mary were called Nonjurors. All the Scottish bishops, and most of their clergy were Nonjurors. They believed that their prior oaths to King James remained sacred and binding. Because of their disobedience, the crown deposed all Scottish bishops, and reinstated the presbyterian Church as the Church of Scotland. No longer subject to state control, the Episcopal Nonjuror bishops were free to implement liturgical changes. They returned to the practices of the ancient Christian church - and restored traditional elements to the Eucharist. In 1784 three Scottish Nonjuror bishops in Aberdeen consecrated Samuel Seabury as the first bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States. In return for consecrating him, Seabury agreed to introduce the Scottish Eucharistic liturgy into our first American Book of Common Prayer.

Which is why our Eucharistic liturgy is still so in line with theirs that we use it at St. Stephen's two seasons a year. And why I went to Scotland to experience their liturgy in its context.

When I arrived, Dean Jenny Holden gave me my schedule - explaining that most of my time would be spent with St. John's and St. James - both in the city center of Aberdeen. My time was split between them, alternating Sunday services with Rev. Godwin Chimara, who was the curate serving both parishes. On Wednesdays, I attended and sometimes presided at the Taize Eucharist at St. John's. Friday mornings started with Morning Prayer at St. John's, followed by tea/coffee at a local coffee house. Then we walked to St. James for weekly Bible Study with a small group of members from both parishes.

The parishes are only half a mile apart, but they are very different. St. John's is slightly larger, it's a stone church, with a beautiful painting framing the altar area - of angels. Their building is a few blocks from the main street in Aberdeen, which allowed them the land to have two parish halls. In 2013 the church became the first in Scotland to invite their Muslim neighbors to share the building, and one of their parish halls has been converted into a mosque.

The parish is devoutly inclusive. To paraphrase their welcome statement: "We believe in an inclusive church, one that doesn't discriminate on any level on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in church which welcomes all people in the name of Jesus Christ." The statement goes on, and it concludes with these words, "We welcome you. We will care for you. We will share our faith with you."

They practice what they preach! Their worshipping congregation is an eclectic mix of people, and their Wednesday evening Taize Eucharist is attended by many who have found it difficult to be in church. The format of repetitive singing encourages participation from people who struggle with mental health issues, or for whom English is a second language, or those who struggle with literacy. Often there are as many people on a Wednesday evening as there are on a Sunday morning (though they are different congregations.) I was there during Creation Season, so we used the Scottish Episcopal Church's new Creation liturgy.

Half a mile away, St. James is right on the main street in downtown Aberdeen. The street is four lanes across with traffic at all hours. St. James was founded by Anglicans from England as the local English Church - which is a little ironic in a 'God sort of way,' as the current congregation is heavily Nigerian. The congregation is full of families, there are kids and babies all over the place, and several young people who serve as acolytes. Because many don't drive and use the city buses to get to church, people arrive throughout the service. And their location right on Union Street adds the sound of beeping from the crosswalk every three minutes or so. On Saturdays they host Soup and Chat - a time where people can come in and have a bowl of soup, and then homemade deserts, rest, and chat with each other and the volunteers. Because they

didn't have Creation Season materials, we used the Scottish Eucharistic liturgy you and I recognize from our season of Epiphany.

What I learned: The shift in downtown Aberdeen felt familiar, as people kept describing the city before the economic downturn, the thriving downtown, the storefronts and restaurants… and how things have changed. The neighborhood surrounding St. John's was once upper middle class housing. Now that the economy in Aberdeen has drastically shifted, those single family townhouses have been converted into multiple flats, which house many families. St. James wrestles with being a safe haven for those who are experiencing homelessness, while trying to keep their front steps cleared off, and the bench area from collecting trash.

Some of the similarities made me laugh. Remember our recent ceiling leak, when we marked off the end of a pew? St. John's can do one better (or worse) - they have taped off three pews in one front section, because there is a stone slipping above them. They explained the tape - as "just in case," so no one will be crushed should the stone come crashing down!

Other similarities reminded me that we're all wrestling with the same social issues. The shift in demographics, and the economic downturn felt familiar. As did their desire to respond to the needs of the greater community, while striking a balance between those and the needs of their parish.

Mostly, being with them was inspiring. For example - St. James was slated to close several years ago. The diocese had placed Rev. Ruth Edwards there as a hospice priest - to ease them into that closure with grace and pastoral care. With nothing to lose, the priest and parish leadership decided to try an experiment - they removed the pews in the back half of the sanctuary, setting up round tables for conversation instead. Eventually they removed the remaining pews, replacing them with comfortable, moveable chairs. During COVID they revamped the altar area, painting the back wall a color similar to ours - and they moved the altar forward, closer to parish seating. They now have a cozier space that feels full on Sundays. They have flexibility for events, and they are thriving. Some of that has to do with Nigerian immigrants coming to Aberdeen with the oil industry, and word of mouth in that community. But leadership set the stage for change to happen, and it did.

Similarly St. John's recognized unmet needs, and put their inclusive theology into practice - adding the Taize service and welcoming their Muslim neighbors who needed worship space.

Admittedly, these parishes would be considered tiny by our standards. And yet, they matter: to their worshipping communities, to their neighbors, and to the world - as they bear witness to an inclusive and expansive church that shares the love of God. Their hope is to be a light in the

darkness, particularly refuting the more evangelical judgment people assume is the view of all of Christianity.

Lastly - almost everywhere I went, they prayed for **us**. Wherever I worshipped they would pray for me, and for **us** by name. They gave thanks for my time with them, and for your support of my being there.

The Rev. Godwin Chimara, who served as curate to St. James and St. John's sent this blessing to me earlier this week. (Though I can't do it in his beautiful Nigerian accent, let's end with his words.)

"Deep peace of our gracious Lord to you. Deep peace of our merciful Lord to you. Deep peace of our loving Lord to you. May our good Lord who journeys with you through every season renew your strength, deepen your faith and refresh your spirit.

As you return to the familiar places and people you love, may you discover God's presence afresh in the ordinary moments of ministry, in the conversations you share, in the lives you touch, and in the community you serve.

May you have the wisdom to discern God's leading, the courage to embrace new possibilities, the patience to journey with others, and the joy of knowing that the work is God's before it is ours.

And may the Holy Spirit continue to bind you all together in love, so that your lives and witness may continue to reflect the grace, compassion and hope of Christ. And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with you and the entire congregation at Stephen's, now and always. Amen.