

On my very first Sunday here at Annunciation,  
I warned you that I would tell you  
a lot of stories about hiking.  
So, I've got another one for you today.

And it's the story behind the photograph  
that is printed in your bulletin today.

This picture was taken in 2004,  
when I was a junior in college.

I was in a study-abroad program with some friends  
at Oxford University.

After your term was over, we had a month  
to travel around Europe,  
and the first place we went was Ireland.

We wanted to get a little nature,  
so we stayed in a village called Rathdrum  
near a national park  
with a beautiful area called Glendalough,  
in order to do a little hiking – or, *rambling*, as they call it there.

It is absolutely gorgeous there –  
dramatic rocky mountains, poking from  
the greenest carpets of vegetation you've ever seen,  
with the huge and shimmering Glendalough upper lake  
as the centerpiece.

But, you know that thing  
people often say about their local weather:  
“If you don't like the weather here, just wait a minute.”

Well, in this part of Ireland, it is literally true.

It can be warm and sunny one minute,

and literally the next minute,

cold, driving rain.

And back to sunshine, then rain, then sunshine.

Well, in a moment of thinking that the weather had cleared up for the day,

my friend and I decide to start climbing

up the biggest mountain around the lake.

No sooner did we start nearing the top ridge

than we were suddenly surrounded by a thick, dark cloud,

and we started getting pelted not just by rain

but by torrents of hail.

And then, FLASH and CRASH,

lightning strikes the mountain nearby.

This photograph you see before you

is documentation of yours truly

in a moment of mortal panic,

having just run and jumped into a ditch for cover.

My friend snapped this photo because

he thought this was hilarious,

not just that I panicked in this way

but also because I had left him behind

obviously without any thought for *his* safety.

This photo has subsequently become  
an important symbol for me.

A memento, a thing by which to remember.

I see myself curled up, on the ground,  
my face obscured by a hood  
that provides a false sense of safety  
from the elements pounding against me,  
that hood that covers my eyes  
from seeing my own friend.

This photo is a reminder to me of how  
my need for safety can get the better of me  
and make me leave others behind.

And this is how I understand  
what Jesus is teaching about today.

Jesus says two things to the crowds in today's gospel:

First, he tells them that he has not come to bring peace  
but a sword, division rather than unanimity – in fact,  
to split up families,  
which is a difficult idea to bring up  
during the current humanitarian crisis on our  
southern border.

Second, he berates them  
for being able to interpret the weather  
but not being able to interpret the present times.

Why does Jesus say that he's going to split up families,  
what does he mean that  
he brings a sword rather than peace,  
and what does all this have to do with the weather forecast?

Well, a little historical background might be helpful here.  
If you think back to maybe your Middle School or High School  
history classes, you might remember a period called  
the *Pax Romana*, which is Latin for "The Roman Peace."

This was a period, starting about 30 years  
before the birth of Jesus,  
in which Caesar Augustus,  
the 2nd Roman Emperor after Julius Caesar,  
consolidated Roman power,  
quashed all revolts and rebellions,  
and expanded both the territory and the terror  
of Roman power across the entire Mediterranean.

There are two fundamental ways  
that Augustus achieved this so-called peace.

The first, ironically, was through brutal violence.

The garrisoning of Roman troops in other people's lands,  
the merciless quashing of any revolt,  
and the suppression of disobedience  
through the terror of public torture and execution,  
most notably the use of crucifixion  
and the gladiator games.

It was a peace at swordpoint.

The second way Augustus achieved the Pax Romana was by running a campaign of family values –

I kid you not.

In Roman thought,

the familia, the family household, was the most basic and fundamental political and legal unit.

Augustus thought that Roman families had gotten too lax: he passed several laws intended

to shore up Roman family values, including:

1. making adultery a capital offense, with husbands and fathers empowered to be judge, jury, and executioner.
2. forbidding marriage between people of different social classes;
3. requiring that all married couples produce children or else pay fines
4. outlawing being single – widows under fifty, for instance, had six months to find a new husband or else pay fines

The reasoning for Augustus was, for one thing,

he wanted more Romans to be bred

so that the Empire would not be taken over by foreigners

and, for another, he wanted to secure

the power of the Roman state

by securing the structure of the Roman household.

Keeping the Roman family tightly regulated

was the foundation of the “Peace” he wanted to maintain.

Learn how to interpret the present times,  
Jesus says to the crowds.

When you live in a regime that calls itself a Peace,  
a peace achieved by the sword,  
a peace achieved by the control of people's bodies,  
and a peace that is enforced by turning  
fathers and husbands into agents of the state –  
If that is what the word “peace” means right now, Jesus says,  
then do not think that *I* have come to bring peace.  
I have not come to bring peace  
but a sword.

Not the sword of violence that the Romans use for their Peace  
but the only sword that can defeat  
the violent lies on which the Romans Peace is based:  
I have come to bring the sword of truth and faith.  
I have come to bring the sword of freedom and justice.  
I have come to bring the sword of sacrificial love.

From now on, Jesus says,  
five in one household will be divided:  
three against two; two against three.  
Father against son, mother against daughter.  
The Jesus Movement  
undermined traditional Roman family values,  
and therefore it was a threat to national security.  
And that is why it was persecuted so heavily by the Empire.

Many among the first martyrs of Christianity  
were young women who refused to marry  
the men that their fathers had picked for them,  
because they instead wanted to dedicate their lives to God.

The first disciples were young men  
who left their fathers' businesses,  
dropped the nets, disregarded their family obligations,  
and started following Jesus.

And, you know, there are parts of Paul's letters  
that sound like a 1950s morality filmstrip,  
but his writings about family relationships  
were nothing less than treason and sedition,  
because he talks about the *equality* all Christians have  
in baptism, which overrides all other relationships;  
he tacitly forbids husbands and fathers from  
enforcing the Roman legal punishment for adultery,  
and instead says that whatever  
earthly authority a person has  
comes from God, not the Emperor,  
and therefore  
is only to be used for the building up of others  
out of love and in the example of Christ himself.

This was revolutionary stuff,  
and it's no wonder Christians were put to death as traitors.

Now, what does all of this have to do with  
me sitting in a ditch in Ireland?  
And, more importantly,  
what does this have to do with your life?

It comes back to that matter of safety,  
and about how quickly I was willing  
to cower under my hood  
and leave my companion behind  
when my safety was threatened.

Caesar Augustus was a brilliantly successful politician.  
He understood that the most effective way to gain power  
is to make them fear for their safety.

Roman citizens tolerated  
the most monstrous encroachments of the state  
into their most intimate relationships  
because they were convinced  
that it would help the Empire keep them safe  
from all the dangers of the world.

This is how politicians of all stripes, all ideologies, and all parties  
have gained and held onto power,  
probably since the very dawn of human civilization.

And so, when Jesus berates the crowds  
for being able to interpret the weather  
but not being able to interpret the times,  
what I hear him saying is:  
Don't fall for it.



Don't fall for the lie of the Pax Romana.

Don't fall for the lie

that the only way you can be safe  
is by cowering in a ditch by yourself.

Don't fall for the lie

that that the price of your security  
is the *insecurity* for other people.

Don't fall for the lie

that leads you to panic  
and leave other people behind.

Jesus calls us into a life that's riskier than that,

messier, more complicated,  
more prone to failure and chaos and even danger –  
but one built on truth and neighborly love.

There's a reason why Jesus says all this to the crowds

not long after he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

This photograph is an important memento for me,

not only of my moment of panic,  
but also of what happened afterward.

As the storm continued on that mountain,

my friend and I slowly made our way back down,  
but the paths were steep and muddy and wearing away,  
and we lost our bearings.

We eventually found ourselves

on the side of a road but had to guess  
about which was to go along it.

So, here we were:

soaked, muddy wanderers.

And maybe a mile along,

a little Ford hatchback pulls up alongside us.

A young couple leans out the window

and asks us where we're trying to get to.

"Rathdrum," my friend says.

"You're going the wrong way!" they tell us,

"But you're not far. Hop in, we'll be glad to take you."

So now, whenever I look at this photo,

I always ask myself,

which is the life I want and was created to have:

A life in which I'm cowering in a ditch,

or a life in which I help a stranger find *their* way to safety.

Amen.