

**Searching for the Pole**  
**Matthew 9:35-10:15, Pentecost 5, Year A**  
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**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

When you're from a flat part of the world, as I am, and you move to the mountains, your friends from home begin to think of you as adventuresome, as some sort of Indiana Jones-type character. They call and e-mail with questions about the caverns I must have explored, the trails I must have hiked, the mountains I must have climbed. I try to explain that the only slice of the Roanoke Valley that I've traversed with any regularity is the two-mile stretch of Jefferson Street between the church and my house, but to no avail. To my friends, I'm an adventurer.

A couple of weeks ago I decided if my friends were going to keep up this illusion the least I can do is speak knowledgably. So I picked up Bill Bryson's bestselling book *A Walk in the Woods*, which chronicles his attempt to hike the entire Appalachian Trail. That adventure made me think of other famous treks—my mind tends to work that way—and I started reading about men and women who have explored the more famous spots on the globe. All such stories are fascinating, but the ones that captivated me most were the expeditions to the North Pole.

Despite the extreme difficulties associated with a trek to the Pole (more about those later), one would think that *finding* the thing is a simple affair. You head due north, and sooner or later you'll reach it. Not so, it turns out. That are myriad problems locating the North Pole, so many that the debate continues to rage about who has actually found it and who has not.

The first problem is that, unlike the South Pole which is covered by the Antarctic landmass, there is no land over the North Pole. There is only sea ice, and sea ice continually moves. In other words, if one, by virtue of compasses, global positioning systems, or a good old thumb-in-the-air, does locate the North Pole and thrust a flag into the ice, within hours or even minutes the ice may shift, and as soon as the Pole has been found it is gone.

But there's an even bigger problem. The North Pole is defined as that point where the axis of the earth's rotation meets the earth's surface. If, like the spoke of a wheel, the earth's axis were fixed, then we could—at least on our instruments—find the Pole with exact specificity. But it's *not* fixed, it turns out. For reasons unknown, the earth's axis wobbles, and the precise North Pole doesn't stand still. Not only the ice covering it, but the *Pole itself* shifts and moves. So again, just when the intrepid explorer thinks he's found the Pole, he may realize that he's in fact standing on just another ordinary, cold and barren spot on earth.

Have people, then, given up seeking the North Pole? Not by a long shot. But those who make the journey with wisdom do so knowing that the best they'll be able to do in their search to

find the Pole is to *skim its edges*. They know that—like trying to reach the horizon—the Pole is forever elusive. It beckons and lures, and the closer one’s approach, the more palpable *its power*...but also its *mystery*. The Pole won’t be pinned like a moth on a corkboard. It won’t be *known* in any sort of direct, definitive, exhaustive way.

How like God! And how like *us*. We human beings continually set out in search of the divine, usually prompted by the same motivations that lure adventurers to the woods, or the mountains, or the North Pole. These motivations are legion. We may experience an emptiness and a sense that the God somewhere out there can fill it. We may perceive a power beyond us, pulsating and awesome, and an irresistible urge to move toward it. Or we may hear a voice, like someone whispering to us, barely audible above the din of life, calling us out and onto the well-trodden path.

Today, the followers of Jesus head out onto the path. They are sent on expedition by Jesus himself, to seek God and along the way to invite others to travel with them. Jesus is very particular about the way he outfits this expedition. He tells the disciples what they can and cannot take on their journey with them. They are to travel light, and instead of the comforts of home, they are to carry with them tasks and proclamations. “Cure the sick,” Jesus says, “Raise the dead; cast out demons; and declare that God’s kingdom has come near.”

In my recent reading, the other thing that has been of tantalizing interest is the way in which various polar explorers have outfitted themselves. Annie Dillard describes the 1845 Franklin expedition, in which Sir John Franklin and 138 British officers and men headed north to find the Pole and the Northwest Passage. They expected their trip to be quick and direct, and they ladened their ships with what they considered all the important provisions for their quest to find the Pole. This didn’t include fur coats or extra coal for warmth, but these proper, nineteenth century British explorers *did* include a 1200-volume library, a hand organ to play merry tunes, china place settings for all the men, cut-glass wine goblets, and sterling silver flatware.

When winter set in, as it was bound to, the ships of the Franklin expedition quickly became stuck in the icepack. Once it became evident that there was no chance of breaking free, the men disembarked the ship and headed out across the ice, hoping for any salvation. They carried with them those things they believed to be essential provisions. Bodies were later found weighted down with engraved silver flatware, a backgammon board, and lots of tea. Often they were found dressed to the hilt in their thin but finest naval uniforms of blue trousers and jackets.

When the explorers of the Franklin expedition sought the elusive North Pole, they set out half-baked and poorly provisioned. And though *they* were undoubtedly surprised at their own

swift demise—I can imagine them absurdly sipping tea on an ice floe as they froze in their thin uniforms—we should not be. How they set about their search and what they chose to take with them could never get them to their destination.

The same is true of our quest for God. God cannot be approached quickly or directly. Some will *say* they have located God, and with the same certainty that they find their way from home to work. Whether individuals or churches, some will say they have staked their flag with sure and complete knowledge of who God is. They'll presume to pin God like a moth to corkboard and utter truisms about him as if God were a specimen subject to our examination.

And then the ice shifts. The Pole wobbles. And it's gone. Sooner or later in life, the pinned-down God is revealed to be as elusive as the North Pole itself. He'll defy our expectations and disrupt our lives, and those who have claimed to have pegged him with certainty may find that they stand on just another cold, barren, and lonely chunk of ice.

How then are we to make this expedition? How are we to seek God? The first key is to acknowledge that it will not be done quickly or casually. The Franklin expedition saw theirs as one of speed and ease. The expedition toward God will only be made with commitment of heart, soul, and time. We must orient ourselves to the journey, in contemplation, prayer, and a reordering of our whole lives (not just the occasional hour on a Sunday morning).

The second key is to acknowledge the limits to what we, as human beings, can know of God. God is not a prize to be captured (and thank God for that). He will not be known fully and directly. At our very best, we can approach God—as wise explorers approach the North Pole—*only around the edges*. We can sense when we move closer or further from him, and in the briefest of instances we may experience his nearness as if he is right under our feet, but we must also acknowledge that the *mystery* of God is fathomless. He'll surprise us and challenge us and lure us in directions we least expect. And the experience that comes from approaching this elusive God—more like experiencing beauty or love than knowing an object—is far more fulfilling and abiding than the superficial satisfaction one has with knowing a caricature of God that ultimately leaves us in the cold.

And the final key is how we outfit for the journey. We chuckle and raise a knowing eyebrow at the Victorians of the Franklin expedition, but we, too, risk setting out on our quest with unhelpful and ultimately worthless baubles. We give priority to the spit and polish uniforms and the engraved flatware that define *our* world. We encumber and surround ourselves with these things, giving precedence of our time, our money, and our waking thoughts not to the

things that ready us to know God, but to the things the *world says* have value. What little good such things were to the Franklin expedition! What little good they are to us.

We will *only* find the approach to God when we unencumber our lives. We will only discover the passage when we heed the words of Jesus to loose those things by which the world defines us. In place of china and crystal, the Franklin expedition should have carried fur and coal for life-giving warmth. In our lives, we need only the warmth that comes from the mission given us by Jesus. Like the disciples, we need only go forth believing and declaring and living as if the kingdom of God—the new world of grace—is *near*. We need only set out on the path with words of love and hope that cleanse those who feel dirty in the world, that cast out the demons that plague lives. Then we'll sense it. We'll know we are close. The ice will break apart, and we will find ourselves around the very edges of the heart of God.

*Amen.*