

Epiphany 3 January 21, 2024 “Annual Parish Meeting”

Usually, on the Sunday of the “Annual Parish Meeting,” I take the time in the sermon to do the Pastor’s Report, so it saves a little time. This year, as I reflected on this practice, I realized it is wrong: a sermon is a sermon and a Pastor’s Report for Annual Meeting is not, and therefore this is the time to preach a sermon and I’ll make a report later!

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, your Word called the first disciples to follow; grant us to hear this call and the grace to respond. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our Savior and friend. Amen.

When I entered Union Theological Seminary in New York City, there was a professor of Hebrew Scriptures name George Landis. He had been on the faculty for several decades. It was said that joining the prestigious seminary faculty at a young age, he decided to put all his diplomas on the walls of his office to get some respect. The story is told that two of the great theologians of the Twentieth century, also on the faculty of Union, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, were walking through the halls one day and passed the open door of Dr. Landis’ office. After they passed by, Tillich said to Niebuhr, “Ach, Reinie, I did not know we have a dentist on the faculty.” Well, true or not, certainly Dr. Landis was not held in high regard by most of my seminary classmates. He was an expert on the Book of Jonah, just over a thousand words in Hebrew, only four chapters long, and seemingly of little consequence to us as young seminarians. But you know, over the years, I have gained a deep respect for Professor Landis’ choice to center his work on Jonah. What an extraordinary little book, a real example of the saying, “good things come in small packages!” Of course, mostly we know Jonah as the story of the whale, but that’s not really the interesting part, although Jonah’s prayer and lament from the belly of the beast is a profound piece of Biblical literature. To me, there are two really interesting aspects in the story of Jonah: first, how did he get in the whale’s belly in the first place? Well, Jonah is commanded by God to go to Nineveh to prophesy, but Jonah goes off in the opposite direction, jumps aboard a ship to make his getaway. Escape is not going to come that easily for Jonah; God stirs up a storm and Jonah is tossed overboard to be swallowed by the whale, only to be spewed up back on shore. That’s where we catch up with Jonah this morning: as we are told, God’s word comes to Jonah a second time, and he knows he cannot escape, so off he goes to that great foreign city, the largest city in the world at the time, the capital of the mighty Assyrian Empire, threatening the annihilation of Israel. Jonah walks the streets of the enemy territory and, in what must have seemed to him to be a suicide mission, he called out the prophecy, “Forty

days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Now there are three things that are interesting about this prophecy. First, it is the shortest prophecy in the Bible, just eight words, fitting for one of the shortest books of the Bible. Also, in addition to being the shortest prophecy, it is the only prophecy delivered to foreigners, not to the people of Israel. Jonah prophesies to the Assyrians, the sworn enemies of Israel. And finally, it is the most **effective** prophecy in the Scriptures. The people of Nineveh hear it and believe in God, they give up their evil, they fast, put on sackcloth and repent! This never happens in Israel! Jonah’s prophecy is the single most effective prophecy; from the poorest to the king, all, small and great, turn to God. Yes, a little gem of a book of prophecy, but really powerful for its size!

And then there’s Jesus: today in Mark’s short and direct Gospel account, we have Jesus after his baptism by John in the River Jordan, now by the lakeshore, proclaiming the Good News, slightly longer than Jonah’s prophecy, but still short and sweet, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” And among those who hear are the fishermen, hard at work, yet Jesus comes to them. Maybe there’s some connection between Jonah swallowed by the great fish and Simon, Andrew and the sons of Zebedee out fishing, but to me the real connection is the even shorter command Jesus gives to these people in the midst of their hard work, “Follow me!” “Follow me!” A short, simple command, not rocket science, but it changes the world. None of their lives would ever be the same again. And for that matter, neither would ours either: in an incredible act of faith, without reason, without any logic, they acted, they followed Jesus. In the call, these workers heard that radical message for our world: God’s reign is near, we can turn things around and live in the good news of God’s Spirit of Love coming to our lives. And what to do: follow Jesus, follow and learn. Follow and see, follow and act and love. In that deeply spiritual way, this call turns our lives around, opening us up to the lives of our neighbors, especially those whom Jesus calls the least of these, opening us up to caring for all creation, strengthening us to be the peacemakers in this world filled to the brim with violence and war. This is that simple call those young workingmen heard that day on the lakeshore. That call gracious call from Jesus changed everything; changes everything for us.

That simple call, “Follow me!” Given centuries ago, still rings out to you and me as well: in this season we recall our own baptisms, and the power of baptism in our community. This act, this radical act, forms us into the community, indeed I’d go on to say, the “Beloved Community,” of the

Church, coming together in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, coming together in the breaking of the bread, coming together in worship and prayer to be strengthened and nourished at this Altar to carry on this work.

Over a century ago, a young Biblical scholar studied the nature of this call, and especially sought to know who is this Jesus who calls us. After an exhaustive study of all the scholars who preceded, after combing through the Gospels to understand what we could mean by acclaiming him as Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, the Savior, this young scholar concluded:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is. (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, page 561, 1911 edition)

This scholar was Albert Schweitzer, and in responding to this call he quit his Biblical studies, became a doctor and set up a medical mission in Gabon on the West African coast. While a great humanitarian and tireless advocate for peace and a reverence for all life, Schweitzer considered his response simply as doing what the first disciples did in seeking to follow Jesus and become the one who fish for people. Today as I conclude this sermon, we will respond with a renewal of our Baptismal covenant, and we will reaffirm this morning, our intention to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. Thanks be to God for the amazing grace given to us and thanks be to Christ for calling us in this Spirit of Love. Amen.