

3 Epiphany – Year A – January 23, 2011
Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27: 1, 5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23
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“Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are on a camping trip. In the middle of the night, Holmes wakes up and gives Dr. Watson a nudge. ‘Watson,’ he says, ‘look up in the sky and tell me what you see.’

‘I see millions of stars, Holmes,’ says Watson.

‘And what do you conclude from that, Watson?’

Watson thinks for a moment, ‘Well,’ he says, ‘astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I see that God is all-powerful, and we are small and insignificant. Uh, what does it tell you, Holmes?’

‘Watson, you idiot! Someone has stolen our tent!’” (Thomas Cathcart & Daniel Klein). As I know well from my years in customer satisfaction research, perception is everything! And today, I want us all to consider how we perceive Christ in the world, and how we respond to Jesus’ call on a daily basis. Beyond what we already can perceive and know in our lives, we are also challenged today to consider, to what new beginnings God is calling each of us individually, and as a community. We don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes or Watson to extend the boundaries of our thoughts and prayers to encompass a new way of seeing and hearing God, even as we celebrate what has already come into being. This Gospel story is truly a fitting introduction to our Annual Parish meeting.

Matthew tells us that Jesus has lifted His own tent and relocated His camp from Nazareth to Capernaum. It is Jesus’ first major move for his own career, or His own ministry if you like. Matthew describes the move as one precipitated by John the Baptists’ arrest, and therefore, a move that is prompted by Jesus’ perception that His own life and ministry is already in danger. As is frequently the case in Matthew’s Gospel, he also notes that Jesus’ move fulfills a prophecy from the Hebrew Scriptures. In this case, one of Isaiah’s prophecies, describing the coming of God’s light and salvation to the Gentiles. That is God’s universal gift of salvation through grace and faith in Christ Jesus. The story goes on to describe the call of the first disciples: Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John.

Simon Peter and Andrew are casting their nets into the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus speaks to them, saying, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” James and John are in their father’s boat when Jesus calls for them to follow. As it has been said, “Jesus summons with irresistible authority, and the disciples respond with radical obedience.” These simple, uneducated fishermen literally drop everything and immediately follow Jesus as if compelled by some great force. I keep coming back to this irresistible call as being somewhat analogous to the kind of career changes that many of us have dealt with during our working lives. We set out from school or college with a certain career or job in mind, and then a few years later we often find ourselves doing something completely different, or changing careers entirely after ten or twenty years in the working world. How often has that turned out to be a blessing, even if the events that precipitate the change are not pleasant or easy at the time?

The four fishermen respond obediently to Jesus’ call. In at least three respects, they take on a radical career change for themselves. It is sudden, or as the Gospel says, an immediate response to Jesus, seemingly without any other preparation or consideration. That reminds you and me that God most usually calls us in the midst of our ordinary tasks, not because we are especially educated, or otherwise spiritually equipped for the work God has prepared for each of us, but because God always desires our obedience to His call. God’s claim on our lives is absolute, and undeniable. Secondly, there is an incredible amount of trust on the part of the four fishermen. The same kind of trust that we must all exhibit in our own lives whenever you and I respond to God’s call. They leave their occupations – their only source of income – to become itinerant disciples of Jesus, with no promise of even basic sustenance, housing, or other support.

Think about the times in your own life when you have risked something, or everything, for the sake of God's call. Or maybe a time or two when you have given up what appears to be financial security to pursue a passion or vocation that utilized your God-given gifts. Risk is another word for faith. Risk is another word for faith. Thirdly, it's apparent that the first disciples also leave their families in order to become followers of Jesus. In a society then, as now, that values family relationships, their actions are a measure of just how far they are willing to go to serve God first and foremost, and to obey God's voice without counting the cost. It is also the first example of how becoming a disciple of Jesus changes our dependence on flesh and blood relationships, in favor of deepening our dependence on God, and creating new, eternal, spiritual bonds that are essentially more fulfilling than any earthly relationship. But we have to ask, if we had been at the Sea of Galilee and heard Jesus call us, would we too have followed immediately? Notice that Jesus, God incarnate, is the agent here. God doesn't wait around for us to offer ourselves. He actively seeks out those who are willing to put Him first, to become apprentices in and of God's kingdom. We don't have to go back to school or get another degree. If we are willing, God can, and does use us this very day.

Jesus is also embarking on His own new beginning, the start of His public ministry, and His first words extend John's proclamation of repentance, to announce that He will usher in God's kingdom through gathering disciples, teaching the good news, and sharing the gift of healing. The Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright, reminds us that all the references to the kingdom of God, which appear a lot in Matthew's Gospel, are not about our future hope of salvation, or life after death, but about God's sovereign rule here and now, "on earth as it is in heaven". Jesus' ministry, establishing and expanding God's kingdom, teaches each of us to put our faith into action now. In our own lives, Jesus' call is what Joseph Campbell described as a call to adventure, and a change in our spiritual center of gravity. We cannot lose sight of what makes our individual ministries so graceful and filled with love, or what makes this whole parish such a gift of welcoming love in Christ's name to the broader community. These are our foundations, the firm ground from which we reach out, stretch and grow in God's love and grace. As former Episcopal priest and career change master, Richard Nelson Bolles writes, "I have always argued that change becomes stressful and overwhelming only when you've lost any sense of the constancy of your life. You need firm ground to stand on. From there, you can deal with that change."

As much as new beginnings come with hope, they also come with challenges. Jesus is the firm ground that we stand on, lean on, and depend on. Today, as we look together at the future God is calling us to embrace, we cannot be afraid to accept His radical call to obedience. We cannot let fear quench hope, joy, or the risks that are integral to a life of faith. Like Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, and millions of disciples throughout the ages, we can only respond in faith and trust, because what we are being called to is something worth infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. As Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said, "it is only in surrendering ourselves [and all that that encompasses] to Jesus' command [that we can,] paradoxically, know our greatest joy." Let's put down whatever nets are binding us, and free ourselves to follow Jesus' call. Let's ponder the greatness and abundance of God in all creation, even as we realize that God in Christ Jesus has moved our tent, and is constantly changing our spiritual center of gravity. Let's answer God's call to adventure today.

Amen.