

Fishers of Men

One of the ongoing themes of the season of Epiphany is how Jesus of Nazareth was revealed as the Anointed One of God, the Messiah or Christ. In the story that is the basis for the Feast of the Epiphany itself, we learn how a group of astronomers (or astrologers, there was no difference in those times) spotted a new star in the heavens and with the science of their time interpreted its rising as the sign of a new king in Israel. Arriving in Jerusalem, the logical place to find a king of the Jews, they were directed to Bethlehem by the scholars of Herod's court, who relied on their own special learning and drew on the words of the prophet Micah to pinpoint the place of Messiah's birth: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." The magi found Jesus and his family, gave the rich gifts they had brought and returned to their home in "the East." In this story, the child Jesus is identified as God's special servant by means of human science and learning. He is revealed to the wise and to the powerful. The wise pay homage; the powerful, namely Herod the Great and his retinue, seek to destroy the child.

The Sunday following the Feast of the Epiphany took us to the scene on Jordan's banks, where John was baptizing "with water for repentance." With the gathered crowd came Jesus, ready to be baptized by his cousin "to fulfill all righteousness." The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell of the vision of the Holy Spirit descending "like a dove" upon the young man from Nazareth and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The language of the gospels is somewhat ambiguous. Was Jesus alone aware of the vision and the voice or were all present able to witness the proclamation? If the former, then we have a story of the identity and mission of Jesus being revealed to himself. If the latter, the circle of those in the know is growing. The gifts received by Jesus in this Epiphany story come from God Godself in the form of God's Spirit. No one but Jesus seems much affected by the episode. He rushes away to the wilderness for 40 days of fasting and meditation.

Had we followed the trail of Epiphany in the Gospels last week rather than turning our focus to Christian Unity and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we would have a different story about the interaction between Jesus and John the Baptizer from John the Evangelist. In the first chapter of the Gospel According to John, the Baptizer is also aware of the vision of the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove. John also hears a proclamation from heaven but it is slightly different: "the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" John then goes on to say, "And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." The story takes us from the proclamation of the heavens and the prophets, to the proclamation (perhaps private) of God, to the proclamation of the wild baptizing preacher. Those who have heard these proclamations have been the wise gentiles, the usurping king, the Messiah himself, and now the popular prophet. It is John who finally begins the process of expanding the proclamation of the good news that God has sent God's son. In that same story from last week, John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God to two of his disciples, who then follow Jesus. One of those two is Andrew, who promptly passes the word to his brother Simon. Simon also comes to meet Jesus and is given the nickname by which he is still remembered, Peter the rock. Now the gifts brought to Jesus come from ordinary men and the gifts are the gift of their lives.

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In this week's Gospel reading, we get a different version of the calling of Jesus' first disciples. In Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus returns from his sojourn in the wilderness to find that John has been arrested. Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and son of Herod the Great who ordered the death of the babies of Bethlehem, has thrown John into his dungeon for daring to criticize the ruler's marriage to his brother's former wife. Eventually, of course, Antipas will have John executed to please his seductive niece, Salome. Jesus sticks his head in the lion's mouth, figuratively, by returning to Herod's Galilee but not to his home village of Nazareth. Instead, he makes his home in the larger lakeside town of Capernaum. Like John, he begins to preach a message of repentance: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Sadly, Jesus' message, which is actually quite startling, has been made into a toothless cliché by our popular culture. How many of us, when we hear those words, immediately get a mental picture in New Yorker cartoon line-drawing style of a sad looking modern prophet in a sackcloth tunic, with long hair and a beard, carrying a sign that says, "Repent, the end is near?" Somehow, we have taken the best news in history and made it sound like an impotent and laughable threat. "Quick, act like you're sorry because God is coming." We might as well say, "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why..." But that's not what Jesus means at all.

Instead of offering a warning for scofflaws looking to get out of punishment with last minute contrition, Jesus is offering a new chance at life to those who feel trapped in a system that has left them feeling crushed and hopeless. To those who will hear him, Jesus is saying that the power of the empire is being overthrown. For those who are living in the darkness of despair of crippling poverty, light is dawning. For those who live in fear and in the shadow of death thanks to the petty tyrant who rules their region as a client of the Romans, the promise that God is still ruler of the universe is a glimmer of light. And instead of letting someone else point to him as the Messiah, as God's best hope for humankind, Jesus at least tacitly begins to point to himself.

When Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of heaven has come near, Matthew tells us, he proves his point by his actions. He not only proclaims the kingdom by teaching in the synagogues and preaching in the villages but he shows the blessings of God by "curing every disease and every sickness among the people." He may not, as the Gospel According to Mark tells us, openly accept the title of Messiah but he certainly fulfills the expectations of that role which relate to the health of the poor.

So in his actions and in his preaching, Jesus continues the work of the star and of the prophets, of the magi and of the shepherds, of his cousin John – he reveals himself as the Christ. And along with his revelation comes a word of instruction, of calling, of another kind of hope: repent! Again, we've allowed this word to be solely defined in a way that is only a fraction of its meaning. It's not the first time in the two thousand years of the Church that this has happened. Part of the genesis of Martin Luther's revolt against the problems he saw in the Church of Rome in the sixteenth century was in the way that this word had been translated into Latin and interpreted as "do penance." With the enshrinement of formal acts of contrition as the first step in ensuring safety from the fires of hell after death, it was an easy step to the sale of indulgences, those "get out of purgatory free cards" that funded the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and paid for certain princes to acquire collections of holy relics. But the repentance that Jesus

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called for was not the rote performance of assigned rituals any more than it is the moping and cringing and feeling sorry that characterizes our society's understanding of repentance today. It was something far more radical.

Matthew's Greek word here, μετανοεα, means to change your mind and therefore your life. It means to make a U-turn. It means leaving behind the bad news that society offers and turning toward the unconditional love offered by God. One commentator suggests we hear this word as "re-focus." John Petty writes, "To turn means to turn from the established order of the worldly political powers with their hierarchy and cultural division, and trust Jesus who leads the way into a future of reconciliation and equality." The great Baptist-then-Episcopal preacher John Claypool saw a profound sense of hopefulness in repentance. "Jesus would never have invited people to repent if He had not believed that change was possible. If there wasn't such a thing as hope in any given situation, He would never have tantalizingly said to us that repentance was something that we need to do." Another understanding of μετανοεα is "embracing thoughts beyond (the mind's) present limitations or thought patterns." If we are locked into the notion of a punishing God who demands that we feel bad about ourselves, perhaps it is time to repent. Living in fear is not good news; living in hopefulness is.

The change that Jesus calls for was a radical idea to his neighbors in Galilee because they were used to the idea that change wasn't going to happen for them. They lived the same way their ancestors had done for centuries. Life was hard and it wasn't going to get any easier. The names of their rulers might change but taxes were still going to be too high and soldiers would always be on hand to make sure they were collected, whether the soldiers were Egyptian or Assyrian or Babylonian or Persian or from somewhere across the sprawling empires of the Greeks or the Romans. It was hard for them to imagine change that was meaningful.

In an odd reversal, we may have a hard time imagining change that's meaningful because we are able to change our lives so easily. We change jobs now on average every four and a half years. We pick up and move our families thousands of miles with relative ease. Changing our wardrobe, our hairstyles, even surgical change of our faces and body shapes is commonplace. We are bombarded by offers from merchants who are sure that their product can change our lives. One of my favorite contemporary jazz singers, the young Englishman Jamie Cullum, has a song called "Seven Days to Change Your Life." Here are some of the lyrics:

"Just one local call and you'll see
A happy path through life not for free
A little bit fat you can't get a girl
Short on cash I'll change your world
The only way now is straight up
Your deepest despair I'll make it stop
Just 19.95 all major credit cards
And you'll stay alive and you'll go far

In just seven short days
You'll change your life
All of your innocence found
You'll even lose a few pounds

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See yourself making a mint
Quality time with your kids
Send me your money and I'll change your life..."

Again, this is not the change that Jesus was talking about. He was calling for a complete reorientation of life, away from fear and self-centeredness to hope and God-centeredness which is also other-centeredness. He was calling for lives of service and love.

This is played out in our story this morning by his interaction with four fishermen who were to become his closest friends. It's not clear from Matthew's telling of the story how much exposure to Jesus they'd had before he issued his famous call. Matthew may or may not have known the tradition that Andrew at least had been John's disciple first and had at least initially followed Jesus at the behest of his former teacher. It seems likely that they had heard or heard of his preaching since he was based like them in Capernaum. You can't do much in a town of a thousand people without it being remarked on if not witnessed by the majority of them. But it's unlikely that they really knew what they were getting into when he said he'd make them fish for people.

It's an interesting image. To those of us for whom fishing has become a sport, it brings to mind patience and long periods of inactivity, perfect for a little beer drinking and storytelling. We may think of the skill of fly fishermen and how they work at outwitting the prize big fish, old and wise in the ways of avoiding clever lures. And, indeed, many Christians have been taught to think that sort of fishing is what Jesus had in mind for the Capernaum brothers and for us. In this model, Christians are required to study up on current sales techniques, to "hook" potential converts with clever and attractive events or utterances and then to "reel them in" with barrages of proofs of the existence of God, their own sinfulness, the danger of their lives, and so on.

I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind. The local business fishing of Andrew and Simon and James and John was a rather different affair. It consisted of long days of hard work: rowing out to where the fish were, gathering them into the boat with nets, rowing the much heavier boat home, repairing nets. Given what Jesus was preaching, I think he probably expected his new recruits to echo the idea that God was in their land and that a change from a life of fear and darkness was possible. I think the nets that Jesus and those Capernaum boys used to fish for people were nets of kindness and service and healing. And it would have been hard work, too: walking half the day to a new village, gathering people to hear from the new preacher, encouraging and answering questions after he spoke, bringing to him for healing those who couldn't make it on their own, walking home to Capernaum for the night and doing it all again the next day. It was the kind of life they were prepared for after years in the boats. It shows the wisdom of Jesus that he was able to challenge them in a way they instinctively understood. It is yet another mark of his anointing.

I think Jesus continues to call to us today in much the same way. First, of course, he calls us as he called all those within the sound of his voice to change our lives to focus on God's love and extending it to others. We must work on making that change every day of our lives because the pressures of the dominant culture of our time will continue to move us back toward selfishness. The politicians and the salespeople will continue to tell us that we should be afraid, that we should grab whatever we can and hold on to it. They would have us believe that life is a wild

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and restless sea, that we are in danger if we do not cling to the life raft of possessions and wealth and status. But we know that is not the way of life under God's government. It is not the way of life in the Beloved Community.

And, Jesus calls us as he called Andrew and Simon and James and John to follow in his footsteps, which means also calling for people to change their lives in a true and deep way, to accept the love of God which God offers to all. It means teaching and offering healing in the ways that we can. It doesn't, unless we are already fisherfolk, mean becoming fishers of men in the way it did for the four from Capernaum. When those four began to follow Jesus, I think he called on them to do things they had the training and talents to do: lifting and carrying the sick in the same way they'd had to lift and carry full nets, using the bellowing voices they'd used to call out to fishermen in other boats now to gather crowds to Jesus, relying on the stamina they'd developed in years of hard work to get them to the villages where they needed to go. In the same way, Jesus calls us to put to use the skills and talents that we have honed or that God has given us. Teachers are called to put their gifts to use in teaching the Good News. Those in business are called on to let their light shine in what they do day to day in order that people may see their good works and give glory to our Father. Healers are called to exercise their gifts and training in service to those who most need their help. Wisenheimers with loud voices... well, here I am.

My sisters and my brothers, we are so blessed. We are blessed because in comparison with those of the land of Zebulon and Naphtali, with those who lived in Galilee of the Gentiles, we live in a land of freedom and wealth. We are blessed even more because we have already seen the great light of God's love and of life abundant and eternal. We are blessed because God has given us such great personal gifts and because we are able to live into them in a way that those subsistence farmers and fishermen and laborers could only dream of doing. The question before us every day is how will we take advantage of what is still in today's world great relative freedom and wealth? How will we use our gifts? Selfishly, to benefit only ourselves and our families? Or with the generosity and loving-kindness of our God who gives mercy to all and desires that none should perish? How are we living out our faith? How are acting as fishers of people? Are we loudly proclaiming, in whatever way we can, that God is in our land? Are we, through our actions and our words, drawing people to Jesus?

We are in the process of rekindling here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church. We continue to ask Jesus, the light of the world, to shine more brightly through us, to give life to the sometimes feeble sparks of our faith. But let us not forget that we must participate in the process. We must blow on those sparks in our hearts to reactivate them; we must add fuel to our spiritual fires. We can do this by following Jesus just as those four fishermen did, ready to follow Jesus in the tasks that God sets before us, knowing that our call from God will always be to those things that we can accomplish. We must be ready to say, "Here I am, Lord! I will go, Lord. I will hold your people in my heart."

May God continue to bless us with the will and the courage to answer Christ's calling in our lives. Amen.