

## **A Light to the Gentiles**

Today we will have the Annual Meeting of Trinity Cathedral. As Trinity Parish, we have been doing this for 173 years. That is a remarkable accomplishment. Thomas Merton once said about monastic communities that they don't develop a real sense of permanence until they have been in existence for a hundred years. The same might be said of church communities. I do know that whenever our bishop sets foot in this place, he is awestruck by all of the bishops who have preceded him, right down to the first bishop of Iowa, Henry Washington Lee, who built this cathedral.

At the Annual Meeting I'm going to talk about where we are as community, a state of the church, you might call it. You can get a fuller sense of where we are and where we're going by reading the Annual Report. Right now I'd like to reflect on what the readings of the day tell us about our life together. After all, as Christians we are guided by the light of Christ and the Holy Spirit that come to us through the word of God.

The reading that we just heard, from Mark's Gospel, is short and sweet. Jesus calls his first disciples, two sets of brothers, all of whom are fishermen. They hear his call and immediately follow him, leaving everything behind. Note how the passage begins: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." The ministry of John the Baptist has ended; the ministry of Jesus begins. And Jesus proclaims the very same message that John did: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." There's a continuity of ministry and message, the same ministry and message that have been passed down over generations. That is why we are here today: because other people carried to us the good news of Jesus Christ. The first responsibility of our life together is to carry that message forward.

The invitation of Jesus was very simple: "Follow me." It's a model for us, too. Last week we heard how Philip used that model in his conversation with Nathanael. Nathanael was pretty skeptical about the whole Jesus business, so Philip simply said, "Come and see." The two went together, and when they came into the presence of the living Christ, Nathanael was overwhelmed. Is it so hard for us to say to a friend, especially one who is struggling or looking for guidance, "Come and see?" Come and see this beautiful place where we encounter Christ in one another and in our worship.

The commitment to others is very evident in the story of Jonah, a wonderful folk-tale unlike anything else in the Bible. We need to approach it in the way it was intended – as a narrative that tells us important truths about ourselves and about God, and not get hung up on what happened historically and scientifically. It's a story full of droll humor, including animals dressed in sackcloth as though they, too, had sins needing repentance.

Jonah is the paradigm of the reluctant prophet, the opposite of the disciples whom Jesus called. When God tells Jonah to go one way, he immediately goes in the other direction – and suffers for it. As a Jewish prophet, he wants nothing to do with telling Gentiles to repent. He whines, he pouts, and he complains when God changes his mind. Yet Jonah succeeds in spite of himself.

I don't know about you, but I see a lot of Jonah in myself. Not the whining and pouting part, but what it's like to hear God calling and try to run the other way. The clearest illustration is a story I've told before, one that happened 22 years ago this week, at a time when I was singing in the Cathedral Choir. Dean John Hall offered me an opportunity to preach at the 10:00 service. I was stunned. I had never seen a layperson in the pulpit at Trinity Cathedral. I lay awake that night turning it over in my mind, realizing how much I would have to give up in order to rely on God alone. I was already resisting the beginning of a call from God that years later would bring me here as your Dean. That night I imagined having a conversation with Bishop Epting, then the Bishop of Iowa, who would ask me how I knew the call was strong. I practically shouted, *because God will not let me go!!* Fortunately, it was a silent shout – Raisin was still asleep. It was only the first of many times when I've felt like Jonah: God, can't you find somebody else? I've always gotten the same answer: No.

But the story of Jonah is not just about his reluctance. It's also about what he's asked to *do*. He's asked to get well out of his comfort zone and be among Gentiles, with people he'd rather not be near. We, too, are called leave places where we feel safe and comfortable and be among those who are very different from us. After all, God desires that they, too, experience the love of Christ. One of the highlights of last year at Trinity Cathedral was the energy with which the Outreach Team helped us do Christ's work in the community. It's an effort that can only increase as we grow spiritually.

Paul's Letter to the Corinthians expresses the urgency of the work of Christ, with more hyperbole than we are used to. It might sound as though Paul is saying that nothing on earth is worthwhile, so we should live only for heaven. That's not it at all. Paul would rather have us focused on the task before us, the task of proclaiming the good news of Christ. We never know when we will encounter the living God, when we will be called to account.

So there you have the Scriptural guidance for this day on which we take stock of where we are as a parish. Follow Jesus. Proclaim the message we have received. Invite others to come and see. Admit our reluctance to do that, whine if we must, but trust that it is *us* God wants to do God's work, in places outside of our comfort zone. Only in that way will we grow, grow in numbers perhaps, grow in spirit certainly. Only in that way will Trinity Parish be celebrating Annual Meetings for the next 173 years.

[Epiphany 3: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20.]