

Epiphany 3, Year A

January 27, 2008-Annual  
Parish Meeting

RCL

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27:1, 5-13

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

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Blessings to you on the day of All Saints' Annual Parish Meeting. This is the day each year when we get together and take stock of what we are doing and how well it's going, when we elect new Vestry members and take care of the business of the parish.

And on this day we read, as the lectionary provides for us, Jesus calling his disciples. Here is Jesus, asking people to change their lives and follow him. How very appropriate for us today.

Last Sunday, you will recall, we read a different account of Jesus calling his disciples. That was from the gospel of John. In it John the Baptist was pointing away from himself toward Jesus, directing his own disciples to turn and follow the Son of God. We know that two followed Jesus, Andrew and one that wasn't named, and that Andrew went and told his brother Simon Peter and Peter came and followed, too.

Thank heavens, though, that we have four accounts of Jesus' life, because it keeps us from ever thinking we have all the answers. The gospels tell many of the same stories but each writer tells them a little bit differently – Jesus seen through different eyes, by different people, just as we know him through our own different eyes today.

In the gospel of Matthew, from which comes the story we read this morning, the calling of Jesus' first disciples happens near the Galilean Sea. Jesus calls those fishermen right up out of their boats and they follow. Four fishermen, who will now fish for people.

Why fishermen? This week at Bible Study we talked a bit about Jesus' talent for using images that the people could understand and relate to their lives. He describes an abstract concept like the Kingdom of Heaven saying it's like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a big bush and it makes a home for the birds of the air, and the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that causes bread to rise, and like buried treasure that someone finds, and like a huge catch of fish in the nets of fishermen.

It's true that the people he was talking to had first-hand knowledge of fish and fishing and what it meant to earn a living as a fisherman. But why does he call fishermen? Perhaps there's more to it than just familiarity.

Fishermen understand already what it is to feed people. The work they do enables people to eat and sustains their lives. And now, Jesus says, they will help him fish for people, catch others as he has caught them, show them how to follow, too.

And another thing about fishermen – they work by faith. They catch what is unseen, below the surface of the water, and so need to have faith in what they cannot see, whether that means faith that there is an abundance of fish down there to be brought up, or faith in the goodness and self-giving spirit of a man they have just met. “Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.”

So here we are together today, members and friends of All Saints, seeking to increase our faith in what we cannot see.

Coming here because we like the other people who come, or because the style of worship suits us, or because we just can’t get enough of the fine preaching, or because we love the music, these things may have gotten us here to start with, but what keeps us growing and getting better as a community of the Body of Christ is our increasing faith in what we cannot see, the presence of the Holy Spirit in and around and among us.

‘And to those who have, more will be given.’ Some don’t like to hear Jesus say this. But it means to those who have faith, more will be given. It will grow. That’s how the Spirit of God increases, like the yeast that makes the bread rise. We are the yeast!

But I am mixing some of Jesus’ beautiful metaphors. Back to fishing. Fishing for people.

The time and energy we spend here at church is to equip us to fish for people. First, we follow him, as disciples. Now, we can’t literally get up out of the boat and walk with him. His earthly life is past. So instead we meet together with other disciples and do all that we can to pray his prayer, to learn his mind, and to do his deeds.

To pray his prayer – In worship we read Holy Scripture every week, and we pray together. We come to the altar rail and receive the holy meal, asking God to renew our lives. This, and the prayer we engage in at home or at work during the week, this brings us closer to God, reminds us of his constant presence, and strengthens our faith in that which we cannot see.

To learn his mind - We also come here to learn what Jesus teaches, whether it’s by studying Holy Scripture on Wednesday evenings and sharing insights, or attending a Prayer Morning, or hearing a presentation at Monthly Breakfast, or learning more about the lives of those we see on Sundays but don’t really know. For our children it’s coming regularly to Good Shepherd School or Youth Group. We are all better disciples when we use the good gifts of knowledge and reason and thought that God has given us.

Doing his deeds - With prayer and learning as our guide, we are equipped to fish for people as Jesus has called us to do. In the light of our prayer and our knowledge of the world’s need, we seek to relieve the burden of the poor, the troubled, the lonely, the destitute. We try to be his hands and his voice in a world of unequal opportunity. And knowing that the healing this world needs most is the healing of reconciliation – the healing of the relationship between God and his children – we seek to bring others to know the peace that passes all understanding, the knowledge of God’s love.

I urge you to bring a friend to worship some morning. Someone who doesn't have a church home – we don't aim to steal sheep from another's flock, or fish from other ponds. Bring someone but who might just thrive in this community. Don't be afraid to talk with your friends about your experience at All Saints and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

We fish for people. Not so much by advertising ourselves as a friendly, welcoming church, though it is a good thing to do this; Not with our own expectations about growing in numbers and therefore in income, though growth of this kind is a welcome thing; Not for any of our own reasons, though we can think of many.

We fish for people as Jesus' disciples and in ways he guides us to.  
We fish for people with the goal of making their lives better, not ours.  
We fish for people whether we ever see the result of our labors or not.  
And we rejoice at being called for this work.

When we recognize openly that it is the Spirit of God at work here at All Saints that is making things look good, for us and for the future of this parish, when we truly trust in what we cannot see, then we are living as his disciples.

I want to close with a story about fishing. It takes place in a small New England town, known for the good supply of fish in its lake. One summer folks began to notice that a particular new guy in town seemed to be having great success at fishing while everyone else was having a pretty average season. This fella was pulling in a boatload of fish every day and nobody knew how he was doing it.

The game warden was suspicious, and he had an idea. He went up to this newcomer one day as he was bringing his boat in full, as usual, and, pretending to be just an interested fisherman, said, "Wow, you sure are having a lot of success. Mind if I go out with you and see how it's done?" The newcomer answered, "Sure, come ahead."

So the next morning the two set out together to go fishing. They spent several hours out in the boat but no fish were biting. Suddenly the newcomer reached in his tackle box and pulled out a stick of dynamite. He lit it and threw it into the water. Well, there was a huge explosion and a whole bunch of fish flew up out of the lake and landed in the boat.

"Hey," yelled the game warden. "You can't do that. I'm the game warden and we have laws about that sort of thing." The newcomer just reached in his tackle box again and pulled out another stick of dynamite, which he lit and tossed into the game warden's lap. The warden was stunned. He just stared at the dynamite. "Well," said the tricky fisherman, "are you going to sit there, or are you going to fish?"

And that, my friends, is the question for us this morning. Are we going to sit here or are we going to fish?  
Soli Deo Gloria