

Epiphany 3 * All Saints', Parma, OH
January 25, 2009

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It was a beautiful summer evening in June 2006 when I first met the nephew of our church's Senior Warden in the small Indian Reservation in Northern Canada where I served as priest for 3 years before moving to Ohio this past autumn. I was at a wedding reception in a local community hall when a young man in his early twenties wandered in. He had clearly been drinking and quickly came to join the handful of us from the local Anglican Church who had come down to the celebration. If I remember correctly, he had been away from the reservation for a few days, staying somewhere in the small city 45 miles south of the reserve, trying to get some place from the ongoing problems plaguing his family life. By the time I met him, not only had he been drinking but he had also been walking – like other men from the community, he had half walked half hitchhiked into the city a few days earlier and I suspect he had covered a good 10 miles by foot on his return to the reservation by the time I saw him. He was anxious to speak with his aunt, our Senior Warden, and when they were able to find a quiet corner he confessed that he had recently had a dream which he couldn't understand. I do not remember the particulars of the dream, but I do remember his aunt's response after listening to it carefully: "Don't you see, she said, that God is calling you back to Him."

God, she suggested, was calling this young man out of the fears which kept him on a cycle of binge drinking and broken relationships with his girlfriend and child and into the light of a new day. Jesus, she might well have said echoing today's Gospel, was calling him to repent and to believe the gospel – the good news that he is precious in the

eyes of God and can be better, holier, more lovely because of this. This young man was adrift and he was looking for solid ground.

Whatever we may think about dreams and visions like this young man's (or even of the ability of senior wardens to interpret dreams!), one thing native Canadians in Northern Saskatchewan know very clearly is that the fundamental reality of our lives as human beings is that we are called by God – called into existence at our conception, called by name and reborn in our Baptism, called home to God at the end of our lives, called to Judgment when Jesus returns, and called daily into a relationship of love with Him.

This morning's Gospel lesson from early in the gospel of St Mark is a story of calling. It recounts the beginning of Christ's public ministry, when he gathered around him the followers who would eventually be the seed of his Church throughout the world, his first Bishops and missionaries and martyrs. In the story, just to remind us, Jesus has returned from his forty days in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil. Once returned he begins his preaching by calling people to repent and to believe the good news that in Him, God was with them. In the lesson, Jesus then finds Simon and Andrew casting their nets in the Sea of Galilee and calls to them: Follow me, and they come without delay. And again he sees James and John mending their nets and calls to them, and they leave what they are doing to follow him immediately.

On the surface, the message of today's lesson for each of us and even for the young man from northern Saskatchewan seems clear: when God calls to us, we must

respond immediately. As St Paul says in our second lesson this morning, the time is short and we haven't the luxury of waiting to heed the call of Christ to repent and believe.

But while this is true, I suspect that this Gospel lesson has a much deeper and more urgent challenge for those of us gathered here today. For most of us, it is not always the case that hearing and obeying the call of Christ comes easily or quickly. Whether it is Jesus asking us to love our enemies; or to forgive those who hurt us; or to be at peace with each other before we come to the altar; whatever the case, hearing and obeying the call of Christ is often very difficult. Like the young man called by God in a dream and yet still caught in a net of fear and anxiety, the question for many of us is not so much *do* we hear and obey Christ when he calls, but *how* do we hear him and obey given how hard it often seems.

It is sometimes good to remember that Christian story is a simple one. We believe that there is one God whose very life is the perfect love of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. We believe that this Love came down from heaven at Christmastime 2000 years ago to lead a people who had wandered far from God back home to Him. And we believe that this Love has not abandoned us, but lives in us through His Spirit and that one day we shall see God – our Christ – face to face.

It has been the belief of Christians for centuries that learning to hear and obey the call of Christ in our lives – to know when and where he is calling us – depends on this story of God's love for the world being written in our hearts, first in Baptism when it is placed there whole and undefiled, and then in lives which come to understand over time mysterious story embodied in our baptismal rebirth. The urgent vision of the founding

Fathers of the Anglican tradition was nothing less than to devise a clear and simple way of doing just this by offering us a Book of Prayers that guides our daily meditations on the story of God's love for his people.

It is important to note that in today's lesson Jesus is on solid ground when he calls to the disciples, who are floating on the sea. The disciples, like the man at the wedding reception, were adrift. You and I also, I suspect, have known times when we have felt adrift – perhaps an illness, a broken relationship, a loved one passing away. To borrow an image from the Gospel, we know what it is like to cast our hopes and dreams like so many fishing nets into the ocean of this world and to have them come back empty.

Jesus begins his ministry by calling people to repent and believe. To repent is literally to have a change of heart or mind but it is also often translated as to turn around. And to believe is to trust. This rhythm of turning and trusting, of repenting and believing, is the rhythm of the Christian life – turning in new and deeper ways to the old, old story of God's love in Jesus and trusting in its power to heal us. Jesus stands on solid ground in today's lesson to show us that wherever we may be adrift in our lives, wherever our hearts are wandering away from the story of God's love, wherever we may be casting the net of hopes in disappointment, he is calling us and offering us the stability and peace of his presence if only we will turn towards him and believe.

When the disciples repented and believed the decision was costly. And as it was for them, so it is for us. Like the disciples, hearing and obeying the call of God means leaving certain things undone in order to do what matters most, leaving the sea to get to dry land. If you have ever tried to face head on an ongoing temptation or problem in a

relationship, then you know that following Christ in these situations is costly. But God never asks us to do anything that He is not willing to give us the strength for – whether it is to heal a relationship, to take a stand for the Gospel, or even to love and forgive an enemy. This is why we remember today and every Sunday the deepest word which Christ has to say to any of us, that part of the story of God’s love around which everything else revolves: Take eat, this is my Body...Drink this all of you, this is my Blood.

With these words Christ gives us his life to be our life and with that life comes the solid ground of his presence in our hearts.

Where are you adrift? Where is Christ calling you in from the sea to follow him more closely? May he give us the grace to see, individually and as a parish, where Christ is calling us to deeper faith and may we all wait more hopefully and joyfully for the final day when he shall appear and fill all our hopes to overflowing. “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel... They immediately left their nets and followed him.” AMEN.