



SAINT LUKE'S

3RD AFTER EPIPHANY
YEAR B

JONAH 3:1-5, 10
1 CORINTHIANS 7:29-31
MARK 1:14-20
PSALM 62:6-14

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM OGBURN
JANUARY 21, 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this season of Epiphany, the assigned Gospel readings have been pointing to Jesus as the One who has been foretold by the prophets ~ and by John the Baptist ~ as the Light of the world, as the Son of God, and as the one whom God has sent to be the Savior. ‘The Word made flesh has been revealed and we have seen his glory.’ The lessons in this season assure us that Jesus is worthy of our adoration and trustworthy with the task that has been put upon him ~ and that we can put our whole trust in his grace, his power, and his love. The Word has been revealed ~ and now there must be a response to the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ.

The responses to this revelation come when Jesus calls his first disciples. Notice Jesus ministry does not begin, at least in Mark’s Gospel, until John has been arrested. As the forerunner, John’s message has been one of promise ~ and as the Messiah, Jesus’ message is one of fulfillment. Jesus is fulfilling what John has promised ~ and now it is the time for people to make a choice in how they respond to Jesus. When Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people,” they don’t hesitate. Immediately, they left their nets and followed Jesus. They didn’t say, “Oh, just wait one second while I haul in my net.” They didn’t say, “let me return the boat to the dock.” Their realisation that Jesus is worthy to follow is immediate and sets the example for all who wish to follow Jesus.

There is immediacy in following Jesus, because, frankly, there never is a convenient time to be a follower of Jesus. Perhaps this happens to you too: I’ll be sitting, quietly, minding my own business reading a book, and I’ll

hear my husband Jonathan say, “Hey, I’m taking out the trash, can you refill the liner?” and I’ll say, “Yes, yes, in just a minute.” Then twenty minutes later I’m still reading my book. We all think that what we are doing is more important than anything else. But with Simon and Andrew, James and John ~ they all dropped what they were doing and immediately followed Jesus.

With Jesus’ call to us to follow him, that immediacy is still very present... right now. Jesus calls us to prioritize following him over everything else. And that’s hard in 21st century America where we have every device, app, gizmo, and advertisement vying for our attention. But the distractions of 21st century America are no more demanding than the distractions of 1st century Israel. It’s all about NOW ~ and the choices we make.

[9:15 – During the Communion Motet,¹ I hope you will take some time to pray and meditate on the words, as printed in the Orders of Service. That hymn text is all about the immediacy of everything we are doing. It’s all happening in real time and we are a part of it.]

¹ Now the silence Now the peace
 Now the empty hands uplifted
 Now the kneeling Now the plea
 Now the Father's arms in welcome
 Now the hearing Now the power
 Now the vessel brimmed for pouring
 Now the body Now the blood
 Now the joyful celebration
 Now the wedding Now the songs
 Now the heart forgiven leaping
 Now the Spirit's visitation
 Now the Son's epiphany
 Now the Father's blessing
 Now Now Now
Jaroslav J. Vajda, The Hymnal 1982, 333.

There is a story floating around about a woman who applied for admission at a college. All applicants were asked to write about how they were a leader. In her essay, she wrote about how she was actually more of a follower than a leader. She knew she would not be admitted with this answer, but felt it was honest. The admissions board wrote back congratulating her on her acceptance and said, ‘A study of application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are admitting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower.’”

To be followed is a great honor, but it’s an even bigger responsibility. In 2018, to be an influencer on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter is a demonstration that you speak for a large number of people. But that also comes with consequences. We live in an age where being a leader is a sign of strength and being a follower is a sign of weakness. We can be easily tempted into thinking following Jesus is a sign of our weakness. And we’d be exactly right! To be a follower of Jesus is to admit that we can’t save ourselves; we can’t do this alone. It’s a hard choice to choose faithfulness over what’s popular. But it’s nonetheless a choice we must make in the way we live our lives.

Often times, being a follower of Jesus means leaving our comfort zones and making our voices heard over the din of the world that seems to be screaming words drenched in racism, sexism, nationalism, misogyny, homophobia, and every kind of ism imaginable. And as followers of Jesus, who have been buried with Christ in his death, risen with him in his resurrection, and been made a

new creation in his very life, we, by God's help, have made a covenant in our baptism to stand up to evil, to name it, to renounce it, and to turn to God. That's what repentance is. It's turning from evil and saying, 'I will have no part in this.' Yesterday around the world people all over stood up to defend the equality to women in our world...from hundreds in Northampton, Massachusetts, to 120 thousand people here in New York City, to 300 thousand in Chicago to 90 people in Gustavus, Arkansas. Turning from our selfishness and comfort of our homes and standing in solidarity, defending the equal rights of other humans is what one part of our Baptismal Covenant is all about. It's hard work ~ and you know what, it matters. And I can't emphasize this enough: We never have to worry about if we're good enough to follow Jesus ~ because we have already been chosen by God in our baptism. God has called us worthy ~ and God loves us and suits us for the task.

What doesn't matter is how hard the work is; what matters is that we do it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more of the road that is too hard for us." The hard realization of today's Gospel is that the call to follow Jesus isn't an invitation; it's a command. Of course, we have agency in our choosing, because love is never coercive. But nonetheless Jesus' call to us is a command to follow him ~ because God's love and care for us will lead us to more than anything we could ask or imagine. And we can't expect to follow Jesus without being changed. A change of heart and faith is a fitting response to Jesus' call to us.

[11:15 The Sequence Hymn² that we just sang has some insightful things to say about today's Gospel reading. The hymn basically tells us that these simple fisherfolk were just fine, thank you very much before Jesus came along ~ but the very peace that came from God that Jesus gave to them was the very peace that caused trouble for them. The peace of God filled their hearts so much, that their hearts were broken. They followed Jesus faithfully ~ and it cost them their lives. The last stanza says, "the peace of God ~ it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. Yet let us pray for but one thing: the marvelous peace of God."

It's easier to go our own way. It's easier to be selfish. It's easier to only look out for ourselves. But that's not what greater life in God asks of us. Jesus never promises that following will be easy. And the truth is our hearts can never be made new and healed without first being broken: broken from going our own way, which leads to death; broken from selfishness; broken from putting off today what we think we can do tomorrow. But the truth is that we only have today. We only have now.

² They cast their nets in Galilee
just off the hills of brown;
such happy, simple fisher folk,
before the Lord came down.
Contented, peaceful fishermen,
before they ever knew
the peace of God that filled their hearts brimful,
and broke them too.
Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,
homeless in Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teaming net,
head down was crucified.
The peace of God, it is no peace,
but strife closed in the sod.
Yet let us pray for but one thing -
the marvelous peace of God.

~ *William Alexander Percy, The Hymnal 1982, 661*

To answer Jesus' call is to acknowledge there is hope for us. More than anything the Christian life demands hope: Hope in the confidence that God loves us and is for us. And "If God is for us, who can be against us?" We hope and trust that God cares for us and guides us in the way we live our lives; and we have hope in the promise that God wants us to share in greater and eternal life with the risen Christ in the fullness of God's kingdom. May Jesus, who has called us, give us his grace and power to follow where he leads and bring us to hope of the fullness of the glory of God.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE CHURCH OF ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
487 HUDSON STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10014

TEL: 212.924.0562

FAX: 212. 633.2098

WEB SITE: WWW.STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG

EMAIL: INFO@STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG