

Sermon 02-7-10

As you may have observed or deduced about the congregation of St. James' there is a significant number of our members who have moved here from other places—either from a different locality and/or a different denomination. How many of you are like me—cradle Episcopalians? If you came out of a different church culture it may surprise you when you first visited here, how quiet this church is when you come in. Granted, this may be because for some reason people are sometimes late here when they never would think of being late for work or school. But there's a more important reason, and I'm thankful for it. Hopefully the first few minutes before the service begins is being used as a time to settle down, re-group, re-focus in a short prayer and get set for this hour or so of prayer and praise to be a time that can change your life.

Does that sound extravagant? Not if you're coming here with the kind of mind-set that I visualize about you when I begin early in the week preparing to preach the coming Sunday. It helps me to think of you as coming with expectancy and anticipation, ready to listen and reflect on what the words and the music

say to you, and sensing that your experience is being shared with those around you.

This hour or two on Sunday mornings can be one of those very special opportunities where you have some reflection time to gain a perspective about your life—to put things in proportion and on balance in your thinking, for the big things, the important things, to be validated and more visible, and the little things to be sorted out and acknowledged just for what they are—little things. That, my friends, can help take you to the biggest goal in life---God’s purpose for you—to asking “what is God’s purpose for my life, what goal is worth giving myself to?”

(Here I am—talking this way on Super Bowl Sunday, when the minutes of the Saints and Colts players on the field, or the advertising minutes off the field, are worth millions. I guess I want every Sunday to be that special for you. Maybe that’s a preacher’s “audacity of hope.”)

Audacious or not, “the drama of God’ actions” is precisely what the Bible’s principal theme is for us, especially those sections that are selected for our reading on Sundays. And—here’s a tip- another reason to get here early is to quickly read the bible

insert before the service starts, which will give you a chance to really understand what the preacher is talking about!

One of the sub-themes to keep watching for is “God’s call”, especially in this Epiphany season. Sometimes it’s not easy to get one unifying theme from three readings and the psalm, but this Sunday different aspects of God’s call are opened up for us in all three readings. In our first lesson we have the classic call of the prophet Isaiah so overwhelming it was as if coals were burning on his lips and heart, so overwhelming that he could only respond, “Here am I!—send me!” Then in the second lesson we read the call of Paul. He too was overwhelmed by God as the living resurrection of Christ Jesus was no longer just from the testimony of others, but a present reality that changed his life from being a persecutor of Christians to one whose discovery of the meaning of Christ’s resurrection would literally change history.

Then the theme of “call” brings us to the Gospel for the day, reading and hearing about the one who first gave any and all of us the secret and promise of a purpose and hope for the future. Yes, Jesus wants to speak now about purpose and hope, hoping that you really can hear him speaking to your needs, as he did

to those who first heard him, right in the midst of what was real life for people in a fishing village.

(Right at this point I have to offer a disclaimer. I know virtually nothing about fishing or fishing villages. The closest I ever got to fishing was with my very young granddaughters at Sky Top Lodge in the Poconos, catching what I think were small trout from a very well-stocked pond. I don't know much about fishing, but I do know what it is to be looking for purpose and hope.)

How will his purpose be fulfilled? The thread and theme of all four Gospels are in the gracious invitation "follow me." Think about it. With the woman coming to Jacob's well every day for water, Jesus gives an invitation to follow him and find the water for life that will never run dry. To Matthew who was an outsider because he was a tax collector, Jesus extends an invitation to come and have dinner with him. In John's Gospel the very first invitation to the disciples was "follow me" and at the end of the story of Jesus life that he had offered on the Cross, when the discouraged disciples are doing what we do to kill time nowadays—go fishing or go shopping—he comes to them and says, "Follow me."

Jesus is still calling us, as he did to the first disciples. If there is one thread or theme to pick up in the Gospel stories that will help you personally, it's that theme of Call—but not to pleasant pastimes of fishing or shopping in well-stocked ponds or Target stores. In the words of the old hymn, Jesus calls us—over the tumult, of life's tempestuous seas.

We may find we're just not ready for that. The call of Jesus, the call to a higher purpose has with it a challenge that many people, then and now, are likely to find to be more than they are up to. Remember—the rich man comes to Jesus wanting the secret of eternal life and Jesus says to him, “there is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own, and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me” But when the inquirer heard this he was very sad, “for he was very rich.”

The call always comes with a challenge. Our reluctance to really respond to Jesus' call may be because we know that we are rich in so many ways. Or, to look at it a different way, we are aware enough to discern from deep in our hearts that with all the superficial satisfactions of life we think that we are really unworthy. “Woe is me, I am lost, I am a man of unclean lips” Isaiah says. And when Jesus provides

such an abundance of fish that they almost break the nets in two boats, Simon Peter's reply is "Go away from me, for I am a sinful man."

When I hear the Gospel promises of abundance, of hope and purpose I have often felt that way: I am not worthy. Humility is the right place to start when you're beginning to search for a better way to live, but that's only the beginning. In the Gospel today, Jesus answer is "don't be afraid. From now on we'll be doing more than just catching fish, we will be catching people. The whole world is going to be changed for you"

So this is a word for us as we get into our favorite pew for some minutes before the service starts, do we come here preparing for a catch? Do we come expectantly, really expectantly, believing that there are opportunities and insights that may come out of our time together, week in and week out? Or do we go to please our spouse or do something we think is good for our children, or just out of habit? Expectations count with God. You can see that all through the bible.

Lent is coming, and this Lent we will have a special opportunity to go deeper into the water of our

expectations by taking part in five sessions of a program actually titled “Deepening Life Together—Praying God’s Way.” Watch for the next issue of the Pilgrim coming next weekend to read all about it. Certainly Cindy will be talking about it next Sunday.

As I pray and prepare to preach I cannot help but think about Haiti and the challenge that people face there, not only to find food now, but to rebuild an entire nation. And that reminds me of an old mantra that fits their situation and ours as we too come expectantly to these times together: “Give a man a fish and he will live another. Teach him how to fish, and he will live forever.” As we come together in the weeks ahead I pray that we will come expectantly, for the food of eternal life. AMEN