

This morning the psalmist cries: Lord, speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face."  
Your face, Lord, will I seek. Hide not your face from me, nor turn away your servant in  
displeasure.<sup>1</sup>

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...*amen*

Today, Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee. The Baptist has been arrested by Antipas. Jesus is seen as John's successor. It is not safe for Jesus to remain in Nazareth so he withdraws to a new home in Galilee. Here in Galilee, land of Jew and Gentile, Matthew's Jesus, 'the great light', will bring God's message of salvation to all people. Thus the prophesy we hear from Isaiah is fulfilled. Those that have walked in darkness since the Assyrian deportation of their ancestors are brought out of darkness: 'on them the light has shined.' The "light" now dawns in Galilee for those oppressed by the yoke of Roman oppression.

In our collect this morning you and I pray that we will be open to God's call: "Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation.

God's children have responded to God's call down the long path of time. God calls Abram in Genesis: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Immediately Abram accepts God's call. A thousand years later the prophet Elijah calls Elisha. Elisha hesitates only to say farewell to his parents, burn his plow and slaughter his oxen.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 27

Like Cortes who burns his ships, there is no return. Elisha follows the prophet until Elijah is taken up to God in a whirlwind.

Today as he walks by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees Simon, who is called Peter. Jesus also sees Andrew, his brother, casting a net into the sea. Jesus says to them, "Follow me..." As with Abram, *immediately* they leave their nets and follow him. In the very next verse, Jesus sees the two brothers James and John, in the boat with their father Zebedee. Jesus commands them and *immediately* they leave *their boat and their father* and follow him.

What's going on here? Jesus sees the brothers, they do not see Jesus. Jesus calls them, they don't call Jesus. Jesus could be just a guy walking along the beach. Wouldn't a rational person ask a question at this point? How about: "sure, but where are you going?"

At business school there are tools for making decisions under uncertainty. Had we studied the case of the Galilean Brothers Seafood Purveyors we could have applied a "T-analysis." This would have demonstrated the pros and the cons of Jesus' offer to close their prosperous, going business. After all, the Zebedee family owned a boat.<sup>2</sup> Or we could have worked through a 'decision tree' exercise, to evaluate, then cost out alternatives...maybe transfer the business to a family limited liability corporation or put it into a blind trust.

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<sup>2</sup> RT France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, (2007) p 147

The Four Brothers are confronted with the most important decision in their lives. They are called to follow someone they do not know along an unknown path to a destination they know not where. They are called to forsake their entire livelihood, their tools of production, their lifelong relationships with customers and friends. They will abandon father and family. They are called by an unknown Jesus, whose mission is undisclosed and follow him to an unknown destination.

You and I know the outcome. We have read ahead. The four disciples will travel the road that leads to Jerusalem and the cross. James will become the first apostolic martyr, beheaded by Herod. (Acts 12:2) Simon Peter and Andrew will follow soon after to their own crucifixion. Of the twelve, only John is thought to have lived to a natural death.

Today you and I witness Jesus' first miracle. We witness the power of God's creative word in Genesis, now spoken through Jesus. Through the power of Jesus's words 'follow me,' God calls the messianic community into being. These four fishermen were at work, casting nets, supporting their families. They were not seeking a new life. Yet at the command of Jesus they *immediately* respond. They abandon the life they have known, leaving family, friends and livelihood.

Of the four, it is possible John might have known of Jesus through his connection with John the Baptist. But there is more to this than that. God's power is beyond human knowing. Augustine tells us of God: "I could not seek you if you had not already found me."<sup>3</sup> Willingly, without

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<sup>3</sup> *Confessions*

hesitation the four fishermen respond to the power of God's love poured out to all humanity at Creation. They will learn of Jesus' mission soon enough, as they enter the majestic scene of his teaching and healing at the Sermon on the Mount.

We see the power of God's call in our own time. Travel back with me to September 11, 2001. By 9:00 am the first responders approach the burning and collapsing World Trade Center. Among these are professional firefighters. They recognize the peril ahead. Yet in response to God's love, they *immediately* respond to this higher calling. 431 of them will die as they labor within the inferno to save others in mortal danger.

Fifty years earlier, in November, 1950. Marine and Army units are fighting a savage rear guard retreat from the Chosin Reservoir. It is bitter cold. The UN force is confronted by 130,000 Chinese regulars committed to annihilate them. Engaged in hand to hand combat, Marine PFC William Baugh and Second Lt Robert Reem react instantly to Chinese grenades that land inside their perimeters. Each *immediately* throws himself bodily on the grenades. In absorbing the full impact of the explosion, they sacrifice their lives to save their fellow Marines.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells us: "Discipleship is not an offer man makes to Christ. It is only the call which creates the situation. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it

gives a man the only true life.”<sup>4</sup> As the patristic scholar Robert Wilken tells us, “Love is the one human endowment that moves us to seek the face of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus promises to be with us whenever two or three are gathered (18: 20). God’s call is to be in community. So on this day of our Annual Meeting it is fitting to reflect on those who have responded to God’s call and journeyed to support our worship community. Marcus Borg reminds us that discipleship is not an individual path, but a journey in a company of disciples.<sup>6</sup> In John Shea’s description of the church: “Gather the folks, tell the stories, break the bread.”<sup>7</sup> The stones embracing and supporting us in the arm of the wall behind me stand as silent memory of so many who have brought us across the fifty years since our founding.

God calls us when we least expect. Perhaps you have felt it as a gentle tug and only years later realize...‘yes, yes, that was the special moment.’ God’s call may be dramatic, as St. Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. As the Benedictine Monk Jean Leclercq describes it: “the love of the the world lulls us; but, as if by a thunderclap, the attention of the soul is recalled to God.”<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps God’s call came in a whisper, an awareness we were powerless to resist. Consider O. Henry’s short story: *The Last Leaf*. Joanna is in bed, near death with pneumonia. She is convinced

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. SCM Press

<sup>5</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought. Seeking the Face of God*, Kindle edition (Location 3069) Yale University Press (2003)

<sup>6</sup> Borg, Marcus J., *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (Kindle Locations 2867-2870). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> John Shea, *Stories of God* (Liguori: Liguori Press, 2007), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, (Fordham University Press, 1961), p. 30

that when the last leaf falls from the vine outside her window, she will die. In the apartment below lives the elderly artist Behrman. Behrman intends to paint his masterpiece one day, but has not raised his brush in that direction yet. He is protective of Joanna and her twenty-something roommate upstairs and is gravely concerned for Joanna's state of mind. It is a stormy November night. Only one leaf remains on the vine. Behrman receives the call to paint his masterpiece. In the alley outside, with aid of a torch he paints the remaining leaf...the last leaf that will never fall...on the wall outside Joanna's window. She awakes in the morning. Joanna's leaf survives, she begins her road to recovery. Behrman has completed his masterpiece. The elderly artist is discovered that morning, in the alleyway, lying near his fallen ladder, dead from pneumonia.

In closing, let us pray for our own calling, in the words of St. Ignatius:

Lord, teach me to be generous.  
Teach me to serve you as you deserve;  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labor and not to ask for reward,  
save that of knowing that I do your will.

Amen

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Works Referenced:

This is a homily delivered to a congregation at St Barnabas Episcopal Church, Greenwich, CT on January 22, 2017. I am indebted to the following for their insights into the lectionary for the day: R.T. France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament – The Gospel of Matthew*, (Eerdmans, 2007), p. 138-148; Donald Senior, *Matthew*, Abington Press, 1998, p.60-66; Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*, Yale University Press, Kindle Edition; Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, HarperCollins e-books, 1999; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. SCM Press, excerpts accessed online; John Shea, *Stories of God* (Liguori: Liguori Press, 2007), p. 8; Jean Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, (Fordham University Press, 1961), p. 30; M. Eugene Boring, for commentary on the Matthean lectionary in the *New Interpreters' Bible (Vol VIII)* Abington, 1995  
*Rager C. Bullard, January 22, 2017*