

[Readings: 1 Samuel 3:3b-10, 19; Ps. 40; 1 Cor 6:13c-15a, 17-20; John 1:35-42]

I like the story of the young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

In today's Gospel, Phillip comes to Nathanael and proclaims that he has found the one whom Moses wrote about. He is Jesus of Nazareth. While we do not know what expression Nathanael had on his face when he responded, I think that it is safe to say that his response revealed a cynical sneer. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Answered Phillip: "Come and see." Something good can come from being a follower.

There's a lot to be said for following an inherited religion -- the kind many of us received from our parents if we were baptized as infants. It shows, first of all, that someone cared about us enough to represent us in the reception of the greatest gift of all: our membership in the life of Christ. Someone loved us and nurtured us in a living faith, perhaps sending us to parochial school or religious education/faith formation classes to learn more about what it means to be a Christian and a Catholic. Someone may have seen to it that we got all of our sacraments in order: Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation.

Maybe your family prayed together at meals or at bedtime, or attended Mass together on Sunday morning. Think about the religious images that were available in your home: a crucifix, a statue of the Blessed Mother, a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Maybe you shared Bible stories together or the lives of the saints. Maybe family members modeled the works of charity, forgiveness, and service for you in ways that impressed you and enlivened your faith.

But those among us who didn't have the advantage of an inherited faith --those who may have come into the Church as adults -- are not really at a

disadvantage. They have been granted something that those with an inherited faith may not experience: the priceless moment of decision. Religious faith is something they once felt the absence of and then actively sought.

Attaining membership in the Church and coming to the Lord's Table in the Eucharist are privileges they keenly appreciate. The moment of decision, in which one deliberately chooses to follow Jesus as a joyful, missionary disciple, is a precious hour that shapes everything that comes after it. When we reject with clear vision the empty promises of worldly power, and embrace the path of love and service, the life in front of us will never look the same.

In the Bible, it always sounds so black-and-white and immediate. One minute, Samuel is asleep in his bed, dreaming a young boy's dreams. He is not waiting for God to call. He won't recognize the voice of God when it speaks to him! But after his priest-mentor Eli tells him how to respond to the Lord, Samuel finds the words and the courage to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." From then on, Samuel will grow in stature as one of the great prophets of Israel, the anointer of kings and mouthpiece of the Most High.

The time of decision comes to Paul on his way to Damascus, his hand clutching papers permitting him to arrest and slaughter Christians. He is struck to the ground, blinded, as the voice of Jesus demands that he answer for his actions. Paul, a zealous Pharisee, was *not* looking for Jesus! But Jesus was looking for him, and so Paul accepts the invitation to become the great apostle to the Gentiles and most-quoted writer of the New Testament.

The disciples around John the Baptist had made up their mind to follow the great Baptizer on his mission. Imagine their surprise when John points to Jesus and shouts, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" Two of John's disciples transfer their allegiance at once to Jesus. One of them, Andrew, even goes home to fetch his brother Simon Peter.

And from that day, men who made their living fishing found a new vocation they had never dreamed of in the service of the Teacher. One would become the leader of a new community of faith, and both would die for their beliefs.

Those of us with an inherited faith may feel a little cheated at the idea that we never got the chance to decide, once and for all, that this Jesus was for us. Even those who came to the Church through the RCIA may sense that their journey in faith was more gradual and less dramatic than the stories we hear in scripture. Faith in God may never have been a question for many of us.

For some of us, becoming Catholic may have been more for the sake of convenience than a burning desire to celebrate at the Lord's Table. Maintaining Church membership may be more about habit than conviction.

And to all of us, in whatever situation we find ourselves, faint or fervent, Jesus walks into our lives today and asks, "What are you looking for?"

What is our answer? Do we want religion as usual, something comforting and unchanging and unchallenging? Or do we want to know, as the disciples did, where Jesus is headed? To their question, Jesus replies only: "Come, and you will see." *Come* -- don't just stand there, don't expect things to stay the same. If we want to see where Jesus is headed, we have to *follow* where he is going. Discipleship demands that we are willing to move out of our complacency and familiar comforts and ask new questions of ourselves. It will necessarily mean change and sacrifice. Our time of decision, we see, implies movement.

Who in your life has been a mentor and helped you hear the voice of God? Who has been instrumental in helping you discern your life's calling?

How is God speaking to you most powerfully in your life today?

Can you name a time during the past year when you helped someone listen for God's voice in their life?

"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

"Glorify the Lord in your body."

"Rabbi, where are you staying?" "Come, and you will see." AMEN!

[Jonah 3:1-05; Psalm 25; 1 Cor. 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20]

Comparisons between Jesus and Jonah go back a long way. One might say that Jesus started it. One day the Pharisees came to him insisting on proof of his authority. Jesus was so angered by this demand -- weren't his teachings and miracles proof enough? -- that he declared the only sign this evil generation would get is the sign of Jonah. It was a remarkable statement. And in order to appreciate just how remarkable, let's go back to the story of Jonah itself, to see why Jesus took the sign of Jonah for his own.

From childhood on, we remember Jonah because of the colorful fish tale at the heart of his story. The prophet spent three days in the belly of a fish, represented in most kiddie Bibles as a whale. What we understand, linking this vivid memory to the Gospels, is that Jonah's three-day sojourn in the body of the fish parallels the three days Jesus spent in the darkness of the tomb. Both men were swallowed whole, and by the grace of God, liberated on the third day.

So the sign of Jonah is resurrection, we say. Therefore, Jesus does what He does by the authority of his Resurrection to come. This is God's sign that Jesus is who He says He is, the beloved Son of his Father. But when we focus only on the fish story in Jonah, we miss the fact that, as scholar John McKenzie points out, the book has more wonders than this. The story is nothing *but* wonders: the storm that stops when Jonah is ejected from the boat. The fish that regurgitates him whole. The plant that grows up in a single day to shield him from the sun. Some scholars would say these are all parables. But the greatest amazement is the wholesale conversion of Nineveh. The fate of Nineveh, in fact, is central to the book's purpose. Nineveh repents, and God spares the city. And Jonah, good Israelite that he is, can't bear it.

To appreciate this, we have to consider what Nineveh, capital of Assyria (now Iran), might mean to a citizen of Israel. To get the picture, all we have to do is read the Old Testament book of Nahum. Nineveh was hated because Assyria, as an empire, was successful. They trespassed against Israel throughout their common history.

In 722 B.C., most significantly, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, Samaria, fell to Assyria, sealing the nation's fate. There was no love lost between the people of Nineveh and the children of Abraham.

More to the point, we might consider who our enemies are, and how we might feel about their destruction. Are there countries, governments, groups, or private individuals we would like to see "smited"? Do we think God agrees with us and would like to smite them, too? There you have Nineveh; for though she was destroyed in 612 B.C. by Babylon, she, too, seems to enjoy a mysterious resurrection in every age.

Jonah is hardly Jesus. When he hears God's call to prophesy to Nineveh, he jumps on a ship to Tarshish. Nineveh is east; Tarshish is far, far west. We get the picture: Jonah will go to the ends of the earth to avoid God's will being done. Verses missing from today's First Reading say that God's Word has to come to Jonah a SECOND TIME. How many times does God's Word come to us before we have ears to listen and a heart to respond?

But the fish, at least, serves God well, and Jonah is spat upon the shore he despises. Nineveh takes three days to cross, but Jonah walks only one day, announcing the city's fate. Compare his gloomy phrase: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed" with the urgent and hopeful words of Jesus: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom is at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news!" Do we proclaim the Good News, or do we run away from it?

The miracle occurs: The city of Nineveh, from the king to the beasts in the field, repents its evil ways. Citizens and animals take up sackcloth and fasting. It's enough to impress God, who declines to carry out the threat of annihilation.

In the story of Jonah, Nineveh gets 40 days to consider which way to go: pursue their present course of destruction, or turn and possibly be saved.

Down to the last cow in that great Assyrian city, the choice is made to repent and throw their nation on the mercy of God. That's a good bet -- if you believe that God's mercy is greater than all of human sinfulness. And it is.

The process of conversion is not simple or convenient, but it is necessary for Christian discipleship. Jonah wouldn't turn, so he got turned around by a Higher Power, but his heart wasn't in it. Jonah drags his feet through Nineveh with his message of mass destruction. His story is ours. We face Jonah's question: Will we turn our lives around while there's still time to do so? Conversion isn't easy, but it is possible, and the opportunities to make a U-turn come regularly. "This is the time of fulfillment. Repent and believe. Follow me."

St. Paul tells us that this world is passing away -- for some of us sooner than we suspect. God's ways are many: sometimes sudden, sometimes gradual, but all lead to joy and salvation. The trouble is, we never know the day or the hour, so are we willing to take the chance that we still have time to weigh the odds of personal or corporate extinction? Are we going to let yet another invitation to follow Jesus slip past us? Because time does foreclose eventually. He speaks of "Kairos," that moment in time when things happen, like the Kingdom is here already, versus "chronos," the measurable time line which goes from now into infinity. Christ is here already to inspire our words and actions.

Monday/Tomorrow we have the opportunity to make another choice: It's the annual day of prayer and penance for life. We Catholics are asked to do what we can to acknowledge the gross violation of human dignity that legal abortions uphold. Some will pray, others do penance, some will do both. What is life worth to us? What are we willing to sacrifice to uphold its sacred character?

Fifty years ago, Richard Cardinal Cushing of Boston wrote about the Church's need for courage. He said: If all the sleeping folks will wake up, and all the lukewarm folks will fire up, and all the disgruntled folks will sweeten up, and all the discouraged folks will cheer up, and all the depressed folks will look up, and all the estranged folks will make up, and all the gossiping folks will shut up, and all the dry bones will shake up, and all the true soldiers will stand up, and all the church members will pray up, and if the Savior of all will be lifted up . . . then we can have the greatest renewal this world has ever known. AMEN!

[Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Ps. 95; 1 Cor 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28]

How many of you remember the children's game, "Follow the Leader?" A group of children select who will be their leader. The leader determines what path the children will take along the street or sidewalk or driveway. Whatever the leader does, the children have to follow. Raise their arms and shake their hands, march instead of walk, say something silly instead of just being quiet.

Moses is the leader in much of the Old Testament. Only it isn't up to Moses to decide what the people of Israel are to do, or where their journey is to take them: God tells Moses and then Moses tells the people what to do and where to go.

In today's First Reading, Moses is coming to the end of his faith journey. He has successfully and faithfully led them through the desert to the Promised Land. Now, according to God's will, another prophet is to lead them home.

How will that prophet be selected? Unlike the political process, where a potential candidate is trained, appointed or rises up because of a family dynasty, God alone is the One Who selects and creates a prophet. Moses' successor is promised to come from his own kin, his own family, calling his own people to repentance. This prophecy is fulfilled: God provides generations of new prophets to succeed the old, and God provides the holy words that come from their mouths.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul is not denigrating married life but is endorsing stability. Nor is he implying that married people cannot be devoted to the Lord. Last week, I helped a family bury their father of 93 years, who had been married to his wife for over 60 years. Their daughter-in-law and their grandson gave moving testimony to the example of faith and love of their father-in-law and grandfather. Both loved the Lord and gave witness to Him through their vocation of marriage. St. Paul speaks in today's Second Reading of the equality of husband and wife, of a mutuality that remains positive and valid, and of the call for both to make the proper priorities. What are the anxieties of your worldly life that keep you from growing in faith and in your faith practice?

We also have to remember that St. Paul writes this letter to the Corinthians thinking that the return of Jesus Christ in glory is imminent. If YOU were told that the Lord is coming back for us soon, how would YOU react? What would YOU do differently?

“Immediately” is a word which St. Mark uses a lot in his Gospel. The original Greek text in our Gospel for today says that Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath IMMEDIATELY and begins teaching and healing. Note that unclean spirits recognize Jesus before the clean and the righteous people do!

Sometime in the fifth century B.C.E., shortly after Israel returned from exile according to scripture scholars, the prophetic tradition that was to represent God’s will to the people died out. It’s unclear why, although Jeremiah predicted this occurrence with his prophecy of the new covenant written in every heart. The nation would no longer need teachers to mediate the divine. “All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord.” Jeremiah’s prophecy of the *interior covenant* has been called the most important verse for Christians in Hebrew scripture. The indwelling knowledge of God is essentially what Christians describe as the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost would be a long time coming after the death of prophecy, however. The Bible gives us almost no record of the time from the fifth to second centuries B.C.E. Then came the generations of the Maccabees, the rising of the Roman Empire, and gradual oppression of the Jewish state. Leadership became a pick-up game. And few were listening intently for a word from the Lord.

That’s at least one reason why the people of Capernaum were staggered by the experience they had of Jesus. He commanded unclean spirits successfully. He taught in a way that was not simply scholarly, but rang in their hearts like a tuning fork. The only word they could think of to describe what Jesus did was “authority.” He seemed, frankly, to know God and to speak with divine backing. Israel had not heard a word like that for a long, long time. It was like standing back at the base of Mount Horeb, and this time, not covering their ears.



It may not seem as though the name, “Jesus of Nazareth” is a put-down. When one of the future apostles is told about the arrival of Jesus, he is met with the sarcastic snipe: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” In this case, it is a put-down. Yet the unclean spirit in this man obviously recognizes that this teacher spoke with the authority of God. And he wants to diminish that power by limiting Jesus to His human identity. Rather than calling Him Jesus, Son of God, he wanted Him to be simply Jesus of Nazareth, a regular Joe like anyone else.

He wasn't just Jesus of Nazareth, he was also Jesus, Son of God. His origins were not just a sleepy town in Judea. His origins were in God's own self. And as the Son of God, Jesus came to liberate us from the unclean spirits that plague us all -- even the unclean spirit that wants to put others down.

Jesus teaches and heals “as one having authority.” He calls upon His own power and strength and wisdom, unlike the scribes and the Pharisees, who must rely on the authority of other people, other institutions, and other laws.

The actions of Jesus amaze those around him. Jesus embodies those divine words and deeds in the present and in His person. The Kingdom of God indeed has come. And the demons are running scared. Just as there truly is a God-man named Jesus Christ, there truly are demons and their head, Satan.

What demons are within our hearts, our lives that need to be expelled? Do we believe that Jesus Christ can expel them? Even the best of us harbor within ourselves an unclean spirit or two. “Unclean” simply means not compatible with the holiness of God. This isn't a condition any of us can afford to be in!

Consider the garden variety of dirty spirits that routinely board with us: self-absorption, unforgiveness, envy, judgment, arrogance, hard-heartedness, cynicism, and self-hatred. Identify your familiar demons, practice their counterpoint virtues, and fill your interior house with grace.

Like Jesus Christ, we, His followers, would do well to say what we believe and believe what we say; to do what we believe and believe in what we do. With courage, let us “follow the Leader!” AMEN!