



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, January 26, 2020
The Third Sunday After the Epiphany

Festal Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Matthew 4:12-23
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The Invitation

Your house is on fire.

The flames are spreading up the walls and across the room. So what do you do? Do you try and save a strongbox of important documents or your laptop? Do you spend a few crucial moments rounding up your cat? Do you grab your favorite books or photos of your grandparents? Or do you try and get out of there immediately - to save your life - leaving everything behind you in the fire?

Jesus walks alongside the Sea of Galilee. The smell, perhaps, of fish on the air, the sun beating down on the weather-beaten bodies of the fishermen in their boats tossing out and hauling in and mending their nets. And here Jesus encounters these four specific fishermen, these two sets of brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John and says to them, "Follow me." And they do. Jesus makes them this peculiar offer about being fishers of men and they not only accept but they leave everything behind to do it. Would you do what they did? Would you leave behind your job and your 401k and your cat and your family and your home and follow him off wandering down the road with all the immediacy and urgency of a person in a house aflame?

What compels these four working class guys to follow this stranger right away? Was it something in his eyes or his voice or the way he carried himself? Some authority or authenticity, something intriguing, or something powerful perhaps. Or did he look on them with love that saw them and knew them. Pure and good and real. Whatever it was: they saw in him, I think, the way to a different sort of life than the one they'd known.

Yesterday was the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul. Paul who was originally named Saul was a persecutor of the early Christians. And Saul was on the road to Damascus to do even more persecuting when he saw a great light and heard a voice telling him to get up and enter the city and that there he would be told what he should do. And Saul obeyed, leaving behind his old life, his reputation, his work, and much of his identity and in that leaving behind, in that obeying he became Saint Paul - the great apostle to the Gentiles. His life was changed. The world was changed.

Earlier in today's Gospel reading we hear the prophecy of Isaiah, "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up." Matthew places that prophecy here in his Gospel text in order to point to Jesus. He is the great light sprung up in the region and shadow of death. And somehow these four fishermen in our reading today have the eyes to see it - as a call to a life of purpose or an answer to the yearnings of their hearts or just maybe a way to get out on the

road and see the world. But something in him speaks to something deep in them. And so they take a gamble. They leave their lives behind. Immediately. And they follow him.

I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have.

Knowing myself and my life, I'm not sure I'd have made their choice. Perhaps it was different with HIM standing right there looking at you with those eyes or speaking in that voice. But I know all too well how I choose countless other things before following Jesus in large and small ways each and every day.

There's a cartoon of a dog that's popular on social media. He's wearing a bowler hat sitting at a table with a cup of coffee in front of him. All around him the building is on fire. "This is fine," he says, sipping his coffee. The fire spreads. Still, there he sits. In denial. It doesn't end well for him.

We're like that cartoon dog, I think. Jesus challenges our narrow, frustrated self-centered ways of living and thinking and being. What Saint Ignatius of Loyola called "disordered affections." Our attachments, our sinful unfreedoms. Jesus seeks to free us from those. To invite us to follow him out of the region of the shadow of death and into the kingdom of God. Into deeper, truer life. But it seems we so often choose our attachments instead of that freedom. We choose to stay put, to sit among our sins and selfishness and calcified ways of living like that dog in the house on fire. Saying to ourselves all the while: "This is fine."

We will not with great haste and urgency leave our nets and our boats and go. We will not follow him.

How many times do I walk past a person asking for money on the street? When Jesus clearly says to "give to anyone who begs from you?"

How many times do I choose to hold a grudge against someone or to nurse a resentment? When Jesus says to "forgive others as you have been forgiven."

How many times do I choose to feel secure in my self-righteousness, in my fear or prejudice, in power, pleasure, or comfort? When Jesus says to "take up your cross and follow him?"

How many times do I hurry through my day pursuing my own agenda, not thinking of God at all, when Jesus models another way, a prayerful closeness with God summed up in the intimate word "Abba", Father?

How often do I cling to **my** way of doing things, **my** way of seeing things, **my** approach to life when Jesus said, "(W)hoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it."

The offer to the fisherman is renewed daily in **our** lives.

Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote that,
"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."

"Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," Jesus says. The kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom of God, is at hand, among you, within you. Right here. Immediately. On offer. Now. The word for repentance used in the New Testament is the Greek word *metanoieite* which means to change one's mind or heart. To turn from one way of thinking or being and to embrace another. It points to that moment of transition between the two. The occasion of turning. "Follow me," Jesus says, inviting us. And then we have to choose.

In a poem called, appropriately enough, "Invitation" Mary Oliver writes this:

Oh do you have time

to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy
and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles
for a musical battle,
to see who can sing
the highest note,
or the lowest,
or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air
as they strive
melodiously
not for your sake
and not for mine
and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude –
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing
just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in the broken world.
I beg of you,
do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.
It could mean something.
It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
You must change your life.

One of our parishioners said to me the other day that God offers us grace, gifts, ideas and insights and if we do not accept them, he offers them again and again. Most of the time, I do not accept the invitation of God showing up in the ordinary occasions of my life here in my own Galilean seaside occupation. But sometimes, though, (by grace I'm sure) I do leave my very important nets and my very familiar boat, my busyness and my favorite sins and I open myself to that compelling voice that called the fishermen and St. Paul. And for a moment at least I choose to turn again towards God with at least fewer reservations than usual. I begin to repent again for the Kingdom of God has come near. I try to follow him again. Haltingly, imperfectly. Step by broken step. Out of the oft burning house that is my life and into the clean, good, free air filled with the songs of goldfinches and of God.