

Epiphany 3-B
January 21, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

In the fall of 1971, when our first daughter was just becoming a toddler, a strange looking Chevy station wagon pulled into our driveway on a Sunday morning. It was the color of a root beer float – kind of a coppery brown on the bottom with a white top.

Inside was Jack, one of my bosses from the newspaper where I was a reporter, along with his wife. He had announced to me on the Friday before that they would be taking us to church at St. Paul's Episcopal, just a few blocks from our house. I don't think he trusted us to get there on our own. He had invited us because I had told him I had a passing acquaintance with the Episcopal Church through a college friend whose family took me to church with them when I spent a weekend at their house. I liked their church a lot. My own family fell into that common Pacific Northwest category called "unchurched."

That was all it took. He was right on it. He was, after all, the senior warden and one of the most faithful and dedicated church members I have ever known.

Jack really loved the Church. He really loved Jesus and longed to share what he loved so much. The invitation to join them at church was not about securing another pledge to shore up the budget. It was not about adding another child to the Sunday school. It was not about notching up the attendance statistics. It was not about recruiting a youth group leader or newsletter editor (two volunteer jobs I held in that parish later).

It was something else. Something both simpler and more complicated. It was simply to share what he had discovered and lived for many years – a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. That was a call he had first answered in his native England and continued to answer in his work

at the newspaper among other journalists striving to tell the truth, in his family, in his community and in his leadership in the church.

The best way I could describe what that meant to him is from the Collect for Peace in the Prayer book that begins “O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom.

I think that it was the perfect freedom Jack found in his call to follow Jesus and serve God that shaped his journey. I know the witness of his life helped me to translate that longing of heart and soul into a way of following Jesus and brushing up against the Kingdom.

We heard Mark the Evangelist’s story of Jesus calling his first disciples in the gospel reading today. Mark is simple and straightforward in his account – not a wasted word.

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.’

And then, encountering a couple of brothers who were fishermen near the sea, Simon and Andrew, he said “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Down the beach he repeated the invitation to another set of brothers James and John. Both sets of brothers, Mark tells us, walked off the job to follow Jesus, leaving someone else to do the fishing (for fish at least). Jesus met them where they were – at work.

We might find it remarkable that those four men left everything behind so abruptly to follow Jesus. That they would be willing to follow this man who had burst on to the scene of their lives and invited them to join with him on a journey that somehow spoke to their longing of heart and soul. I wish we had the audio version. Did they hear it as a command—or a gentle invitation – or a provocative challenge? More to ponder.

I'd guess that many of us have mused about whether or how we could do the same thing. To disconnect from the familiar – family, workplace, friends, home --and start on a journey that included a lot of unknowns. A journey that took some risk.

What we know about first century culture tells us that these men had very likely heard about Jesus before he arrived at the beach. Word of mouth was a powerful communications tool—their version of Twitter or texting, perhaps. It is possible that they had either met Jesus before, or at least heard about him. As John Pilch says, “News traveled quickly in the ancient world thanks to gossip networks.” They heard about Jesus seeking others to join him in a common cause and that cause didn't begin with theology as much as it did with the oppressive difficulties of their daily lives in a land under foreign occupation– some very basic stuff: justice and peace. They sought hope and change and it was the promise of the Kingdom of God that drew all of this together.

Their call was to follow Jesus, and to repent. We often think of repenting as feeling sorry for our sins, but this meant even more. It meant more than to simply change your mind, or to regret your sins. It meant for them a turnaround -- to reorient their lives toward God and the coming kingdom.

The followers we hear about the most – the disciples – were a group of men. But women were there, too – often unnamed, but still a part of the story and part of the larger journey. Women who were healed, who offered hospitality, who became believers, who stood at the foot of the cross and eventually shared the good news of the resurrection. All of them, men and women, who were part of this journey are like spiritual ancestors for us.

In today's reading, the journey was just beginning and it would not always be a smooth

one. There would be a lot of challenge and learning as they followed Jesus. They would sometimes misunderstand him, or make a misstep. They would falter in their faith. But they would also follow – seeking the Kingdom.

It's hard not to think of our own call as we read this brief gospel account and let it sink in. We prayed in our collect this morning, "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..." Living and leaning into that prayer can shape a life.

What does that look like? How do you feel called by Jesus in this time and in this place? Last year our theme in the Spokane Diocese was "Following Jesus together" – pondering the call to follow that all of us share and finding some commonality. This year's theme is a next step: "Loved and called. Listen and respond." How do we experience the love of God? The call of God? Where does that lead us? How do our lives change? How are we challenged?

We all have longings, hopes and desires. Sometimes they are for simple things – for tangible things like a place to live, food on the table, or a family. Often they are for more intangible things like security, acceptance or belonging.

But sometimes they are for something that is harder to describe or name – but still something we know we can't live without. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. Theologian Ronald Rolheiser describes the way we experience it it as being together in justice and peace and being part of a community of life in the Holy Spirit.

It is the already and the 'not yet' at the same time. Something we work for and long for in this life as we wait for its ultimate consummation.

This is an interesting journey that we are on -- called to follow, called to seek the Kingdom, live with an undefended heart and follow in the steps of Jesus -- whatever that means for us. Often it is a bit like walking the labyrinth – heading to a place of presence and peace in the center, but walking a journey of many twists and turns along the way. But it is a journey centered in the good news – news that we are loved and cherished by God, our companion on the way, and the one who emboldens us to live into the promise of the kingdom -- and, like my friend Jack, maybe even going fishing – for people.