



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Keep fishing!

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 26, 2020

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Based on Matthew 4:12-23

In the name of the One who brings light into our darkness. Amen.

We just heard Matthew's gospel story of how Jesus calls his first four disciples, these two pairs of brothers, and how these four immediately leave everything to follow Jesus.

A bit of context: In Matthew's gospel, this account follows Jesus' baptism by his cousin John in the river Jordan, and then his forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. John has now been arrested; John's voice has been silenced. Jesus "withdraws," not as a vacation or a retreat following his wilderness experience. The Greek word carries the meaning of "flee for safety." Jesus knows now he is in danger from his association with John. But there is nowhere safe from the Roman powers. Jesus withdraws to Capernaum, a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. It seems that Jesus picks up where John left off, using John's own words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee. I try to imagine what he's thinking ... praying ... as he walks. My life is in danger; what now? How to move forward? How to go about the work God has called me to do?

It's while Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee that he sees Simon Peter and Andrew. And then he sees James and John. Jesus calls them, and each of them respond *immediately*. Immediately Peter and Andrew leave their nets; immediately James and John leave their boat and their father. They all leave their daily work and their families to follow this Jesus character.

I've always marveled at that "immediately" part—that Peter and Andrew and James and John "immediately" followed Jesus. Maybe because I myself have historically not responded "immediately" to what it seems God may be calling me to do. I tend to want to take time to look from every angle, to consider the pros and cons, to make a list of the pros and cons, to test if I may be mis-hearing what I think I'm hearing, and sometimes actively run the other way as fast as I can.

I wonder: did Peter and Andrew and James and John pause even for a few minutes to wonder about this man who was already dangerous? Was Jesus already so compelling? Did they think, Wait—what exactly is the job description for "following" this person? Did they have any idea what they were getting into? Even if you'd grown weary of the family business, or if you were feeling

stale and yearned for a little new adventure, or even if your family was driving you crazy, you didn't just up and leave. Leaving your livelihood and your family was an exponentially bigger deal in the first-century Mediterranean world than it is today. I wonder: What was it that made them know almost instantly this is what they needed to do, even if it seemed to make no sense and flouted every convention?

After years of wrestling with my own discernments and being privileged to companion others in theirs, I have come to believe that God calls each of us in the unique way each of us is able to hear. God is patient—and persistent. God does not give up on us. God will use all of us, our strengths and our weaknesses, our successes and our failures, all of our experiences. God uses every bit of us; nothing is wasted. God has been called the original recycler.

This year, likely because I've been preparing to leave St. Bart's after exactly twelve years (to the day) as one of your clergy and after an astounding 32 years total that St. Bart's has been my spiritual home—this year, I've also been reflecting that in this Gospel passage we glimpse the very beginnings of the Way of Jesus, the original Jesus movement.

As some of you have heard me say before: I believe Jesus came to show us how to live in relationship—in relationship to each other, in relationship to God, in relationship to all of creation. I do not believe Jesus came to found an institutional church. Human beings being what we are, we have created a church, or rather, many different churches. Church that is at the same time both the Body of Christ in the world and a human institution with its attendant human divisions and frailties. Not at all perfect, but with immense capability for transforming the world.

Some of you have also heard me say I agree with Phyllis Tickle and others that we are living through a Reformation, with Reformation being “the rummage sale the church has every 500 years or so.” [1] The Church may appear to be dying, but it's not. I believe we are right now living through the birth pangs as the church births into some new form that we can't see yet. The church has been around over 2,000 years, and it's not going to die now. But that's another sermon!

Some 2,000 years after Jesus calls these first four disciples, our Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry (now famous as the Royal Wedding preacher) is calling us back to our roots as the Jesus movement. Presiding Bishop Curry puts it this way:

God came among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to show us the Way. He came to show us the Way to life, the Way to love. He came to show us the Way beyond what often can be the nightmares of our own devisings and into the dream of God's intending. That's why, when Jesus called his first followers, he did it with the simple words, “Follow me.”

“Follow me,” he said, “and I will make you fish for people.”

Follow me and love will show you how to become more than you ever dreamed you could be. Follow me and I will help you change the world from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God intends. [2]

This beloved community of St. Bart's is our own local branch of the Jesus movement.

When I walked through these front doors for the first time in 1988, as I was church shopping after moving from South Carolina to New York City, I found a warm and friendly welcome, which I did not expect to find in New York City, and certainly not in such a grand church on Park Avenue. I

found spaciousness. I found invitation. I found teaching and preaching that expanded my mind and soul. I found ways to give and to receive. I found a safe place to learn new ways to serve: how to serve breakfast as part of a team on Sunday mornings, how to administer the chalice without drowning someone, how to carry the cross (the smaller, lighter one that I could lift), how to polish the silver and clean the linens for Altar Guild, how to pray with someone at the prayer desks. I found that when I made mistakes I was still loved and encouraged and kept around rather than being cast into outer darkness. And along the way I met some of the finest people I've ever known.

Now, somehow, it's 32 years later. The warm welcome and hospitality and invitation and gracious spirit and generosity I first experienced are still here. Some of the people I met during my first months are still here. Many others have moved away (Manhattan being famously a place where people move in and out), but they're still out there and stay connected to this place. I like to call them our St. Bart's ex-pats.

Even with all the clergy and parishioners and visitors who've come and gone during these past 32 years, St. Bart's welcome and hospitality and invitation and gracious spirit and generosity—and feistiness—are still here, alive and well.

Alive and well and poised to thrive into your own next chapter. And make no mistake: In these critical times, our city, our country, and our world desperately need what St. Bart's (and the Episcopal Church) have to offer. Other churches, too, but I am biased!

As I move into my own new chapter, I will now become a St. Bart's ex-pat. I leave with my heart full of gratitude for all we have shared together over these many years. I leave full of love and admiration and hope for all of you, this beloved community of St. Bart's.

I hold you all in my heart and prayers, and ask you to do the same for me.

Keep following Jesus! Keep fishing for people! I will be cheering you on!

May God bless you and keep you.
Amen.

[1] *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing And Why* by Phyllis Tickle, 2012.

[2] <https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-curry-jesus-movement-and-we-are-episcopal-church>