

St. Andrew's Cathedral
Jackson, Mississippi
Sermon for January 14, 2018 ~ Epiphany 2B
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

When Jesus began his public ministry, the first thing he did was to form a community. You've heard that said from this pulpit before. It is significant that our faith has been a shared faith from the very beginning. To be called to follow Jesus Christ is always to be called into responsible living in community with other followers of Jesus. Those disciples, walking with Jesus for two or three years, were formed and shaped to continue his mission after his death and resurrection. The calling of the disciples marks the beginning of that community of followers of Jesus we refer to as "The Church." The Church was formed by Jesus Christ and continues to be empowered today as the delivery system for his message. The Church doesn't have a message; the Message has a Church!

The experience of those first disciples set the pattern for those who would come after them. They did not volunteer for the mission. They were called. There is an important difference.

Take Nathaniel, for example. (Jn. 1:43-51) He was approached by Philip, who had already met Jesus and answered his call. Philip said to Nathaniel, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathaniel's response is priceless and has a familiar ring to it; "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Imagine Nathaniel having a low opinion of the location from which Jesus came. Philip was not at all discouraged by Nathaniel's skepticism. "Come and see," he said.

Nathaniel went and Nathaniel saw. His encounter with Jesus was profound. Jesus knew his name and seemed to understand him in a way that surprised Nathaniel. Nathaniel blurted out, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Whatever epiphany occurred in that initial encounter convinced Nathaniel that Jesus was for real and his own inner response compelled him to go with Jesus.

Those who have experienced a similar encounter with Jesus know that we did not initiate that relationship. We did not volunteer to love him and serve him. We found ourselves in a place where the invitation was so generous and personal and the presence so powerful that we could not resist. We knew in an instant that we would follow him anywhere and learn from him how to live life to the fullest. He would be the one to open heaven!

On occasion, we've had an opportunity to introduce others to him or to invite them to "Come and see." Sometimes, those invitations have been met with a certain amount of skepticism or resistance. But those who have accepted the invitation and met the Savior in Word and Sacrament, in an authentic community of his followers, in the signs and wonders his Church has been able to perform in his Name, often find themselves in the same place as Nathaniel. It is more about discernment than decision. It is more about vocation than volunteering.

In this season of Epiphany, as we read of those early encounters with Jesus, we have opportunities to reacquaint ourselves with the Lover of our Souls. As he calls us by name and invites us again to follow him, we are strangely compelled to go with him beyond the limits we have imposed upon

ourselves. We find ourselves wanting to introduce others to him. They will come with us because they see in us an unmistakably authentic devotion. Does it make sense? Not always. As Blaise Pascal said, “The heart has reasons which reason cannot know.” But we all know what it is to love someone and believe in someone so intensely that we will do whatever is necessary to sustain and enrich that relationship. Sometimes, following Jesus is not that hard. At other times it is hard. Some have even laid their lives, reputations, and fortunes on the line in following him. Because following Jesus as his disciple and risking our lives in the advancement of gospel imperatives can’t be accomplished without divine aid, we respond “I will, with God’s help.” We just can’t do God’s work in the world without God’s help.

We hear this call against the backdrop of continuing violence in our world and in our own nation. Whatever may be said about the factors that influence these conditions, it is abundantly clear to me that it is all a reminder that the Message entrusted to us still needs messengers. We stand near the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and listen to polarizing rhetoric from both ends of the religious-socio-political spectrum. Some would tell us that we simply need to downplay that. But, what if instead we turn off the “autopilot” switch and point to the Savior who is trying to lead us to a new and better way of living with one another. We should help one another to become conscious of how our words and tone influence others. I speak as the chief of sinners when I tell you, we have to stop using violent images and calling names and labeling people with whom we disagree. I suggest to you that the next time you are tempted to call someone a “libatard” or a “right-wingnut” you ask yourself if that is any more appropriate than using an ethnic slur. What if pegging someone with a denigrating political label became as unpopular as telling a racist joke. Are we guided by our biases and the biases of our political handlers more than we are guided by the Lamb of God? If you are following him, what is it that you want from him? Are you following him as Sovereign Ruler of your life? Such a relationship entails responsibility – to be a light to the nations, starting with our own.

We are also mindful that tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day. We have a tendency to romanticize Dr. King’s call and turn down the rheostat on the light he brought to the social, political, ethical, and spiritual illness of this nation – not just the illness of racism, but of war and poverty and oppression in general. He was not assassinated because everybody liked what he had to say. He was assassinated because he sought the truth and pricked our conscience and made us uncomfortable. He accepted the responsibility that came with his vocation. Did you know that his last sermon was preached in an Episcopal Church on the Sunday before his death? He delivered that sermon from the pulpit of the Washington National Cathedral and in it he called the Congress and the President to accountability for their actions. You can read it online. I have posted link to it on e-piphanies.com. I suggest that instead of getting caught up in the sentimentalities of tomorrow’s observance, when we pat ourselves on the back for all the progress that we imagine has been achieved, that you read that sermon and search your own conscience in its light.

Whenever and wherever we recognize his call to us, may we answer, “I will, with God’s help.” And may the light of the Epiphany lead us to the glory and to the responsibility of being called by Jesus Christ.