

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner  
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany/Annual Meeting Address  
January 22, 2017  
Text: Matthew 4:12-23

And Jesus said to them, *"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."*

This past week was a week where various voices cried out to be heard. From local and national remembrances of the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to the swearing in of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of these United States, to the Women's March (and the men who joined them) as they marched yesterday across cities throughout our nation and around the globe, to city residents who took to the streets of St. Louis in the wake of the shooting death of a 15 year old girl. These were voices unified by the continuous cry for peace, equality, and justice, not just for some but for everyone. And as I read and studied the passage of Matthew, I felt and heard God's continued call for all humankind, no matter the nation or ethnicity or creed, to turn back to him and to remember the command of his beloved Son, that we must love one another.

Human history really has not changed all that much throughout all these generations. Oh, we have come a long way with technology and various advances, inventions never thought possible. The world has become noisier and busier. We are greatly occupied with our own self-care and concerns, our own business. For a lot of folks God has been placed in a tidy box or on the back burner as has our worship of him. And a sort of veil filled with darkness looms over us as it did over the people of Israel many, many centuries before us.

Yet it was within this darkness that God spoke to Isaiah and Isaiah in turn announced to God's people that into their world a savior, *the Messiah*, would come. And Isaiah prophesied, *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-on them light has shined."* And it is within any darkness that we as Christians might experience that God always makes good on God's promises to all humankind. God continues to act and speak if we but listen and follow.

Some 2,000 years ago God Incarnate, the Light, came into the world. It was shortly after Jesus' time in the desert that he made his home in

Capernaum, in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. One would have thought that after 40 days and 40 nights of desert sun and wind, and no food that he would have found a more quiet and comfy place to settle down, take it easy and lay low especially after hearing that his cousin John had recently been arrested. But did a place of utopia really exist in first century Palestine? Rome had already occupied its land and its people, the mood tense and dark. And Capernaum was just another backwater town. But for Jesus this was hardly the time to rest. It was time to pick up John's mantle and echo the message of repentance and announce the kingdom of God.

Like John, Jesus walked up and down the sands and throughout the village. Praying, speaking out, teaching, observing. He would need help.

Different from John's gospel, Matthew makes no mention of John the Baptist's disciples and his pronouncement to them: "*Look, here is the Lamb of God!*" There was no mention of them following Jesus and inquiring as to where he was staying. For, as was the custom in his day, rabbis did not look for students; students sought the rabbi. But, of course, Jesus was different.

Matthew simply tells us that Jesus saw Peter, Andrew, James, and John doing what they did best—casting and mending nets, ordinary tasks. He called them and without a word, these men left nets and family to follow him. Matthew gives us no indication that any of them had never seen him before, heard him teach or witnessed any miracle. And no one said: This is the one. This is the Messiah.

Jesus simply said, "Follow me." And they did. And the Jesus Movement was born.

We are Jesus' hands and feet. We are his ears and his eyes. We are his voice that calls out, "*Follow me.*" Are we, by our example, giving people reason to join us in this movement, on this wonderful journey together as the Body of Christ? Are we, by our words and actions, compelling others to drop their nets and leave their boats to follow Christ and to be Christ in the world? Are we seeking as Jesus did, ways to call others into relationship with God?

*"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."*

It has almost been seven years now that you and I have walked a journey together. We have celebrated and worshipped God in the beauty of this space. We have broken holy bread and drunk from the sacred cup and invited others to join us in the feast. We have celebrated and witnessed baptisms, weddings and celebrated years of wedding promises. We have studied the Bible and heard the divine sounds of choirs and organ and piano, flutes, strings and percussions. We have shared wholesome meals and danced in our parish hall. We have said goodbye, 'see you later', to loved friends seeking better climates and loved ones who have gone home to God. We have elected leaders and opened our doors to the community and the diocese. We have rejoiced and fussed and disagreed with decisions made-human beings that we are. We have 'adopted' young adults seeking to find their places in the world and sometimes in the Church. We have fed the hungry and clothed the naked including those seeking new opportunities in the job market. We have joined our voices and marched for the dignity of every human being. We have also tried to stay true to our mission, the mission that defines who we are and whose we are as followers of Jesus and as members of this faith community of St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church here in the heart of Florissant:

*The mission of St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church, a parish for all people, is to extend God's gracious love and hospitality to each other and to the community by providing worship that inspires, opportunities for service and growth on life's journey, and a sacred place in the heart of Florissant where people can find wholeness and strength.*

We must continually ask ourselves, what do these words mean? Are they as relevant today as the day as they were penned? As they were 'adopted' by members of this congregation?

In this New Year, we celebrate 60 years of ministry and service as a parish. I for one, look forward to the festivities and I hope you do too.

Still, questions remain: What will God have us do? What will God have us *be* now and in the future?

It is no secret that St. Barnabas is standing where so many churches have found themselves of late: small in number, uncertain of the future. As Bishop Wayne Smith told us during his visitation in December, and as the Canon to the Ordinary, the Rev. Joe Chambers, reiterated during his visit

with the Vestry this past Wednesday, we are not alone. It is a fearful and uncomfortable place to be, but we are not alone. It has been said time and again in congregations everywhere; for good or bad, for all sorts of reasoning, the Church is no longer what it used to be for some, not in its purpose or in its priority. Attendance wains. Tithes reduce as people are not happy or as their financial circumstances change. And as people move and they die.

There is no magic bullet. There is no one stop solution. We must keep moving ahead being fully alive in mission, in teaching, in using our gifts whatever they may be.

This is the day that the Lord has made and our call is ever the same: To extend God's gracious love and hospitality to each other and to the community. To allow the Light of Christ to shine through us. To make disciples. To joyfully go out into the world as Christ's hands and feet. To be his ears and eyes. To be his voice that calls out: "*Follow me.*" Follow me and fish for people. That is what the Jesus Movement is all about. Above all, you and I, we, must remember to *trust, TRUST*, in God who promises to make all things new even if what is new may one day be called to be different.

There is enough in the world to make us fearful. Our being together and our work need not be. Our psalm this morning reminds us: "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?*"

Say it with me:

*"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?  
The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?"*

Listen to him. And let us not be afraid!

Amen! Amen! Amen!