

We Catch Them, God Cleans Them

Matthew 4:12-23

January 23, 2011

I.

Today's readings help us understand something about the Bible and our faith in two ways. First, they underscore the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And second, they confirm once again who Jesus Christ is, and how we are called to respond to him.

Let's briefly examine the first point. In our Old Testament reading the Prophet Isaiah foretold that from the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali a light would come to deliver people from the darkness.

And as background, Zebulun and Naphtali were people, not places. They were two of the ancient patriarch Joseph's twelve sons, founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. And each tribe settled in a specific area. The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali lived in what later became known as the region of Galilee, where Jesus began his ministry.

Then we fast forward about seven hundred years from the Old Testament to the New, and we heard Matthew recount that Jesus went to Galilee, which he described as the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy to become light to those in darkness.

The two stories are not a coincidence. Many parts of the Old Testament foretell a messiah described in ways that, centuries later, fit Jesus exactly. And the history of the Hebrew people prior to the New Testament traces a trajectory of events that set the stage for Jesus' teachings about God's justice, eternal life, and deliverance. Those details are another sermon.

This leads to the second point, which is how we are called to respond to Jesus. Today's Gospel tells an extraordinary story about how ordinary men transformed their lives and became Jesus' disciples. I would like to talk about this in the time remaining.

II.

Our reading began with the calling of Andrew and Peter, who were brothers, and James and John, who also were brothers, to become Jesus' disciples. And they did not hesitate even for a moment, did they? They dropped everything and went immediately. Jesus said "Follow me," and they followed. They did not even ask where he was going, or how long they would be gone.

And this might have been because they were familiar with Jesus, and aware of what he had been doing as he began his ministry. It all began in this small geographic region of Galilee, and news probably traveled fast. Jesus didn't just drop out of the sky that day. That they knew each other already is suggested in the Gospels of Luke (5:8-11) and John (1:29-42).

But it is a remarkable story. These four men were not looking for something else to do. They were busy with their fishing businesses. They already had good futures before them. According to tradition, Peter and Andrew owned several fishing boats. And James and John were part of a family fishing business that had several hired men working for them.

This is just the opposite of the story about the old preacher who finally retired, and put a sign on his front door that said, "Done Preaching, Gone Fishing." These brothers, however, could have put up a sign that said, "Done Fishing, Gone Preaching."

And so they responded to Jesus' call. They did not equivocate. They did not say they weren't ready. They simply were called and they answered. They chose to follow Jesus in the greatest story, the greatest adventure, there ever was.

That adventure continues today. The calling of the disciples was the beginning of the messianic community that now is the Christian church in the world. And the example of what these men did two thousand years ago is a model for our own lives as we live and worship in that church.

And we can see there is both bad news and good news. The bad news is that parts of the church, as an organization, have strayed from the Gospel. The good news is the church, as a community of people, still can live the Gospel. In an ideal world the organization and community would be the same. Unfortunately, they are not. Let's start with the bad news.

III.

There probably are people we know who consider themselves good Christians, but regard the church as "organized religion" in a negative sense. They believe they are spiritual, but will not come and worship with us. And by "us" I don't mean St. Thomas, but rather the larger Christian church. In several ways we, as the larger church, have not presented ourselves well.

Think, for a moment, about some of the public images of this larger church as being selfish, greedy, contentious, deviant, and intolerant. Some of the things we see on TV and read in the newspapers about the church don't seem very Christ-like do they? It's not hard to see why some faithful people would not want to be part of that kind of church.

That's the bad news. A few bad apples get all the publicity. But the good news is that the church is here as the Body of Christ that he left behind. We are part of that body, and we now are his hands and his feet to do his work. We still can continue his teachings and proclaim the Gospel.

And the enemy wants to prevent that. But he knows he cannot destroy the church. So he tries to weaken it by leading us to treat it as a secular organization rather than an instrument of God. Satan wants us to focus on budgets, numbers, and committees, and to forget about prayer, worship, and evangelism. He wants us to argue with each other, not love each other.

But the enemy will fail if we remember why Jesus called the disciples and why they followed. They weren't starting a business, they were forming a community that would love and share with each other as God's kingdom came closer. And because of Jesus, people in that community from that time forward would live with God in eternity when their work on earth was done.

But why doesn't that message come through to everyone? When we consider the significance of salvation in the next world, and the blessings that Christian lives offer in this world, we theoretically could wonder why Christian discipleship isn't a no-brainer. Why isn't the world beating our doors down to get in and become Christians?

Well, one reason is the perception issue I mentioned earlier. Another is that some people don't know who we are and what faith can mean. And that's our responsibility. We probably could do a better job of telling them.

IV.

How do we respond? I ask you to think about this for a moment. We have heard about the golden age of this, or that, or the other; the golden age of art, or literature, or music, for example. One of my favorite documentaries is about the golden age of baseball.

But no one talks about the golden age of the church, do they? That's because the church has never had one. The church began with a violent death on the cross, followed by centuries of persecution, and then a time when the church itself had a heavy hand, all interspersed with magnificent and inspiring events, as well as some unrighteous moments.

And the point is that golden age of the church is yet to come. God's kingdom still is on the way. That is our promise and our Christian hope. And the journey we take to get to that marvelous time can inspire now, just as it inspired Peter and Andrew, and James and John so long ago.

When Jesus called those early disciples they did not fully understand the meaning of his message. And they did not know they eventually would go into the world, bring people to faith, and spread Jesus' teachings as the foundation on which the church would be built. Jesus did not have to explain all the details in advance.

And I would suggest that is a good model for us. Today's Gospel tells us we don't need clever arguments or broad theological knowledge. And we don't have to have all the answers to all of the questions people might ask us. Jesus merely told them to follow him. He knew that experiencing faith is better than merely having it explained.

So just invite people to come and see what we do. The church is there to help us. And here I mean the church in the good sense, the church that consists of the great number of good and faithful Christians who are not part of the sensational stories that seem to grab the headlines.

V.

And it won't always work. Sometimes we have to talk to people more than once. But we have an advantage. And I believe that most people are looking for something in which they can believe and can follow. And we all need something to anchor our lives, and to connect us with meaning beyond ourselves.

Jesus Christ offered that to the disciples, and he offers it now. In a changing and uncertain world our Lord and Savior is the light that shows the way; he gives us the strength to persevere; and his love comforts us always.

I would urge us to continue to tell people about our church and ask them to come and see. We all have friends and neighbors who want to believe, but need to be asked. And there are those who might be ready to return to the church they once knew, but need to be led.

In today's Gospel Jesus told those disciples to follow him and he would make them fishers of people. And that gives me an idea about our new sign board in front of the church. It could say, "We catch them, God cleans them."

And that is the way it works. Just as Jesus changed everything for Peter, Andrew, James, and John, he can transform us and the community through the Holy Spirit, who is right here among us right now. Ask them to come and see, knowing that the Holy Spirit will do the rest. *Amen.*