**Follow me**

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, January 15, 2023

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27: 1; 5-13;

1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

St. Matthew’s, Sunbury; The Rev. Dina Carter Ishler, Deacon in Charge

***In the name of God~ Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giving Spirit, Amen.***

Both the stories we tell and the ones we hear from others guide us and shape us- who we are in every stage of our lives and who we will become. As an only child, I grew up in a world where I was surrounded by lengthy adult discussions at our Formica kitchen table or in the living room during holiday visits. Even when someone realized I was listening and interrupted themselves long enough to ask me about school or Girl Scouts to prove they were interested in my life, the conversation almost immediately fell right back into the familiar narratives, the ones that were told each and every time we gathered. Stories of relatives I never met and neighbors long gone, a low-level kind of chatter about people I did know and current events- over time they all became part of my own story.

Preaching is actually a very similar kind of conversation in how it weaves together the stories of a community and invites us all, preacher and listeners, to be shaped by how we receive these stories. We don’t often think of it this way- because the preacher is the only one actually talking! -but it is a shared conversation between God’s Word and God’s people who have gathered together in this particular place and time. We bring to it all we have ever known and experienced and how those things have either hurt us or healed us, and we bring our longings to be something more than we are right now, attentive to what the living Word is inviting us to become. Because so many of these stories from scripture are already familiar, we make new meaning from them as we change and the world changes around us-processing them in ways we never have before.

I listened to a podcast this week that said something about scripture I found amazing in its clarity: “***We must use the vocabulary of the past to step boldly into the hope and promise of the future*.”** Like today, when our readings tell us that God’s presence is a shining light piercing whatever darkness we will encounter and because God is our light and salvation there is nothing we should fear- when the Gospel writer Matthew weaves the ancient prophetic hope of Isaiah into Jesus’ unfolding story: we should hear these as not just stories of past mercies but of God reaching out to us through them so that we believe these promises are real and true for all people. ***These are our stories, and as we tell and re-tell them they transform us.***

It is important to me to talk about this with you early in this season of doing life together, because I hope you will hear my own words- or those of any other preacher’s- as an invitation to wonder about how the intersection of our scripture stories and our own life stories can be a place of growing closeness with God and each other. Speaking both as someone who longs to be faithful to these words in today’s Collect- ***“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”***-and as your spiritual leader, I care deeply about what this longing might look like in your own lives and how the stories of our salvation history are transforming you and shaping your own response.

There is such a sense of calling in today’s readings, not only in the sense of following God’s invitation but in how our own journeys beckon us into ongoing relationship with God. Today’s Gospel story begins as Jesus hears that John the Baptist has been arrested- it is a reminder that faithfulness to our call can lead us to difficult and dangerous places. We hear of Jesus’ immediate withdrawal from his home territory to a very different kind of environment, an intentional time of listening and preparation for him that begins his earthly ministry. And then, we have Jesus’ own invitation to the crowds to turn towards this newness of being that is the inbreaking of God’s kingdom and his call for a few particular fishermen to become his disciples- a call to leave their familiar daily existence behind and share in God’s mission of gathering people in the all-embracing net of God’s grace and love. The “come and see” language of last week in John’s Gospel has become, for Matthew: “follow me”-and they do.

There is a risk in this story that we could hear the word ‘immediately’ as applied to the disciples and think that every time we do not instantly respond to an invitation from God that we are somehow not as true or faithful as they were. “Follow me”, Jesus says, and immediately they leave their nets and their boat and their father- abandon what is also important work and their family obligation- to follow Jesus. What if instead of an exact set of directions, we heard this as a story of how their souls had been changed- of how a longing within them they may not have been able to fully name suddenly took on new life of its own? What if instead of hearing in this story that we must immediately drop everything else in our life if we are to follow Jesus, it means that we pay attention to how something has shifted inside of us and we begin to figure out what that might be? What if it means that we invite the truth of these ancient words to soak in, like a steady spring rain that nourishes the earth, while we remain faithful to the work that is ours to do right here and right now?

And really, any kind of call is in some sense both immediate and the work of a lifetime. Maybe it is better that we cannot see the entire journey before beginning it or perhaps we would not take that crucial first step. Sometimes we find ourselves called in a direction that may surprise us, along a road we never expected to travel, relying on the stories of others gone before us to bless us with the wisdom we will need for the journey. This was my experience, for sure- at the dawn of my discernment journey I was certain of nothing except that I needed to pay attention, to be open to moving forward so that I could figure out what it meant, that there were things about myself I’d have to leave behind- and most importantly, that the voice saying “Follow me” was of God. Sometimes, our faithfulness to the journey is all we can claim- and that’s okay. ***It is our willingness to follow that matters.***

There are as many kinds of callings as there are uniquely beloved people, all equally necessary to the building up of God’s kingdom. It is easy to believe that what we do in our ‘day jobs’ or ordinary lives are somewhat separated from our faithful work as God’s people, our ‘church-y’ work, and I want to be very clear that this is not so. Every moment of our lives, all our ways of being as well as our doing are opportunities to proclaim in words and action and presence what the Good News looks like to the world around us. God so longs for relationship with us- God wants nothing more than that we turn from what we have been doing, worthy as it may be, and follow the road that leads towards God and each other, so embracing our call to be God’s people that our world longs to receive what we have to offer.

Sometimes, like those first disciples, our responses to God’s “follow me” are physical as well as spiritual. Sometimes we are called to do the faithful work of staying right where we are, like Zebedee, who continued to catch fish so people could eat, and sometimes we are pulled onwards towards something new. How we are faithful to God’s “Follow me” will look different for us in different seasons: sometimes it is doing- volunteering, serving with our hands and hearts connected- and sometimes it is simply being present to the movement of the Spirit in us and among us. When we sing and worship and share in spiritual formation, when we offer food and diapers to our neighbors, when we clean the kitchen after a meal together, when we change the altar linen and paint the walls and pull the weeds- ***it is all holy work***. There are no people who serve, no jobs to do that are too ordinary or unimportant to play their part in furthering the kingdom of God. I don’t think there could be a better message to proclaim on this Sunday of our annual meeting, when we are celebrating all the wonderful ways that we are doing God’s work here in our church and in our wider community through the faithful and loving efforts of each and every one of us.

As my friend the Rev.Grant Ambrose, Rector of St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in York loves to say: ***“Come and see- go and be!”* Amen*.***