



The Third Sunday after the Epiphany (B)

January 21, 2018

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+O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

In the book which I am currently reading, the theologian says that “No wonder it is often easier for us to talk about our experiences than it is to talk about God, easier to talk about the gospel’s impact upon us than about the God who is revealed in the gospel. Our experience is tangible and concrete; God is mysterious, elusive and transcendent.” (Brownson, Dietterish, Harvey and West. *Storm Front: The Good News of God*. Eerdsman Publishing, CO., p. 37) When I read these remarks, I wondered about our spiritual journeys.

We claim that we believe ‘in’ God, and yet, I, perhaps we, often struggle to find words how to talk ‘about’ God. “God is mysterious,” oftentimes “elusive”, and the “transcendent” nature of God is difficult to comprehend.

Last week, I thought about God as mysterious, elusive and transcendent. I thought about our readings appointed for today. I tried to see how they were linked and what they revealed about God. The formulators of the Lectionary intentionally chose the first readings and the Gospels to share a common theme which is very often easy to determine. At times, that common link can be traced to the Christian Scripture, the Second Reading, as well.

What occurred to me in thinking about all three readings was one word which kept coming back to me. That word was not mysterious, elusive or transcendent. That word was ‘change’.

The Prophet Jonah was commanded by God to preach ‘change’ to the people of Nineveh. Paul challenged the Corinthians to ‘change’ their ways of living in order to prepare for the second coming of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus called his disciples from the routines of their daily lives. Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John were called from their work of fishing to follow, and follow they did. They radically changed the way they lived their lives in order to follow Jesus.

If CNN or another national news organization were to have interviewed the people of Nineveh, the people from Corinth or the first disciples, just what would they have discovered concerning change? What impact did change have on their lives and would they be able to talk about God in light of having embraced change? More specifically, what might an interviewer have discovered about the first disciples of Jesus? He called them in to service, and that call mandated change.

Next Sunday, St. Mark’s will celebrate the Annual Meeting of the Parish. It will be a time of celebration as we look back over the past year and peer into the year already underway.

Our time together will be a time of reflecting on the goodness of God in our life here at St. Mark’s. We will see and/or hear reports which will contain information from just about every ministry of the Parish. We will feast on chili and other delectable foods during lunch. We will hold elections for the Vestry and Delegates to Convention, a fascinating exercise of the democratic polity which is ours as Episcopalians.

A major part of our time together will be about Parish finances, pledges, other monetary gifts and financial resources which contribute to the budget for 2018. And, how wonderful it is that many of us have generously pledged toward our life together in 2018 for which I and Parish leadership are most grateful.

For me, it will be my first Annual Meeting at St. Mark's. In preparation for my report, I reviewed the report I gave this time last year, January 2017. That was my final report at Saint Peter's Episcopal Church in Cambridge, MA, a Parish which recently celebrated its 175th Anniversary.

Who knew apart from God the changes I would face from that report to next week's report which I will read aloud? Who knew the depth of change which would occur for me as I embraced God's call to serve here at St. Mark's and all that that would entail in my life?

For any one of us who has moved a distance for a new job or career change, change is a necessary aspect of life. Life is not static; it moves forward. Some of us experience change as just simply part of life's journey. Others of us experience change as difficult even in the best of circumstances. No matter what, change is simply part of life's experience. Some changes are good. Some 'other' changes may be difficult and require work.

I wonder if those first disciples who responded to Jesus' invitation to follow ever looked back. I wonder if they reflected on the change which they embraced, change which required strength and courage of commitment. To have walked away from one's work, one's family and one's friends surely required strength and courage of commitment. Like them, strength and courage of commitment are important in our response to the invitation to follow Jesus.

So, what does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it mean to set aside some things in order to embrace others? What does it mean to embrace 'change' in order to follow and to experience the depth and breadth of God's love in Jesus?

I believe we are here this morning instead of sipping coffee and reading the Wall Street Journal or New York Times to experience the love of God in Jesus and in one another. We are here because we are committed to be here, a commitment which just may enable us to experience the joy of knowing that when we commit to God in Jesus, we are blessed.

I frequently talk about the blessing of God's abundant grace in our lives, our individual lives and our lives as a community of faith. I believe that that blessing, that grace, is there for us and is always there. It is up to us to pick that fruit from the tree of life, savor its sweetness and make it work for us.

When we say "yes" to the invitation to follow Jesus, we say "yes" to a world of wonder, love and refreshment. We say "yes" to relationship with God in Jesus and relationship to one another in this community of faith.

This community of faith is strong in our commitment to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. We are strong in our determination to be more like him, to be more kind, more generous, more loving and more accepting and respectful of others. For some of us that's pretty easy. For me and perhaps some of you, the needed change of mind and heart to be more like Jesus can be a challenge. Ah, enter the abundant grace of God!

We are here today to be nourished and fed for a journey of 'acceptance'. We are here as part of our acceptance to the invitation to follow Jesus. We are here to accept God's love in Jesus, a love which can transform us into people of justice, peace and love. Amen.