

“Come and Follow!”

In the beginning of the Scripture Reading, Matthew quoted the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. With those verses in the Reading, we enter into an unfamiliar world, which is very different from our own. We use terms and metaphors that were unknown 600 to 800 years before the birth of Jesus. Leonard Sweet discusses the difficulty and shares, “Yet for all the words we add, we always lose a few to the historical dustbin.” Elaborating, Sweet says, “There are now thousands of ‘apps’ we can download onto our smartphones and tablets. But try asking anyone under the age of 25 what ‘app’ stands for and you will probably get a blank look. After all, an ‘app’ is . . . an ‘app.’”

But an ‘app’ is really shorthand for ‘application’ - that is, ‘a use to which something is put.’ An ‘app’ isn’t a ‘thing.’ An ‘app’ is an activity. An ‘app’ is not a noun. An ‘app’ is a verb. As we struggle to keep up with a language and lifestyle that is ever changing, we should keep in mind this original definition of ‘app’ - because application makes a world of difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘hypothetical.’”

Sweet concludes, “Disciples of Jesus are called to give application to, that is, to actually ‘apply,’ our faith to our life and our lifestyles” (Sermons.com, “The Lifesaver App” by Leonard Sweet)

When we examine the verses just prior to and in the beginning of Today’s Reading, things get a bit confusing because most of us have no understanding of the context of the prophecy quoted from Isaiah. That quote comes from a time – well over 600 years before the birth of Jesus. It was when the situation was very bleak for **“Zebulun and Naphtali”** because they were facing the darkness of defeat and occupation by foreign forces. Over the years, the prophecy never was fulfilled. However, Matthew saw Jesus’ relocation to Capernaum as the fulfillment of that prophecy.

With that information, let us listen to the verses occurring just prior to our Reading from Matthew, along with the first few verses from the Scripture, **“When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he went away to Galilee. He did not stay in Nazareth, but went to live in Capernaum, a town by Lake Galilee, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was done to make come true what the prophet Isaiah had said, ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, on the road to the sea, on the other side of the Jordan, Galilee, land of the Gentiles! The people who live in darkness will see a great light. On those who live in the dark land of death the light will shine.’”** Matthew clearly believed the presence of Jesus – the Messiah meant those living in that area received the light and glory of the Kingdom of God – or the Kingdom of Heaven as it is actually reported in Matthew. **Jesus and his teachings brought the Light of Truth and God’s Purpose to that region.**

“According to Thomas Long, the Reign of God isn’t about making us ‘more effective and productive in our jobs. Our work is truly effective when it serves to express the will of God. The patterns of our lives are not made secure by the kingdom of heaven; the kingdom of heaven rearranges them into the new design of God’s own making.’ But Long says that all this disruption is ‘not to destroy but to renew,’ and our lives are transformed in the process. . . .” (Sermon Seeds Reflection by Kate Huey)

Jesus the Messiah – the Christ did not **come and stay** as the eternal King over this world. Since his purpose was not to merely entertain and amaze people with his teachings and miracles, he needed to have disciples, who would become the leaders of the ongoing Body of Christ, following his Death, Resurrection, and Ascension or Return to the fully revealed Presence of God. If you recall the Scripture for last Sunday from the Gospel of John, then you may have noticed a very different description of the way Jesus began to have disciples follow him. The Gospel of John says two of the disciples of John the Baptist physically followed Jesus after the Baptizer pointed Jesus out as **“the Lamb of God” and “the Son of God”**. One of those two disciples was Andrew, who quickly went to his brother, Simon, told him they had **“found the Messiah”** and then introduced him to Jesus. It was then, according to John, that Jesus gave Simon the name **“Cephas” meaning “Peter” – “a rock”**.

Let’s note the difference between John’s account and Matthew’s version, recalling in today’s Reading, **“As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two brothers who were fishermen, Simon (called Peter) and his brother Andrew, catching fish in the lake with a net. Jesus said to them, ‘Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people.’”** It is possible Jesus started his relationship with Andrew and Peter as described in the Gospel of John and then one day announced to them it was time to leave their fishing business and Capernaum to begin their travels as reported in Matthew. However, that would mean today’s Reading was not the actual beginning of the disciples’ relationship with Jesus.

What was the actual Call or Mission for the disciples of Jesus Christ and how is yours and mine – ours the same and different? There is a temptation to read the words of Jesus to Andrew and Simon as the indication they and we are to recruit others to join the club of cognitively believing Jesus is the Son of God, who obtains our forgiveness, so we get a pass to enter the Kingdom of God when we die. Yet, Jesus was not just like Plato or some other philosopher – religious or otherwise. He was not trying to get the equivalent of having the most friends on Facebook or the greatest number of followers on Twitter or with reference to any other social media in the present or future! **Jesus wanted the Original Disciples and believers up through and beyond the present to become his agents of transforming the lives – the bodies, minds, and spirits of as many people as possible – as many as are receptive to the New Life in Christ.** That task or calling comes with the awareness of God’s continued guidance through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Kate Huey suggests, “Perhaps God is still speaking to us, then, in the midst of our efforts to focus on living comfortable, orderly, pleasant lives, in the midst of our attempts to use the gospel, in the face of our expectations that the church undergird such a life.” Huey continues, “God calls us, each in our own setting, to repent, that is, to turn in a new direction, to open our lives to a radical renewal that may upset and re-orient our neat little, hard-won patterns of comfort and familiarity, the unquestioned assumptions, the privilege we enjoy without even being aware of it. Perhaps this radical renewal will contradict middle-class, prosperity-driven theologies, for example, that seem to under-emphasize the call to work personally and systemically for justice for the poor.” Huey asks, “**How willing are we to have our lives turned upside down in order to experience this kind of repentance?**” Huey notes, “Jesus provoked many of his listeners with such expectations, but on the other hand, he inspired a number of them to leave everything for exactly such a reorientation and renewal. Their lives were never again the same, and probably not too comfortable, either. [There is an important distinction, of course, between being ‘comfortable’ and being ‘comforted.’]” (Sermon Seeds Reflection by Kate Huey)

Matthew’s account continues, “**He went on and saw two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. ... Jesus called them, and at once they left the boat and their father, and went with him.**” An interesting aside is – the Gospel of Luke reports Andrew, Peter, and the Zebedee brothers, James and John, were partners in the business of fishing. Additionally, Luke says it was at this calling experience that Jesus gave them the miracle of an overwhelming catch! However, the Gospel of John shares a very similar miraculous catch was performed through the activity of the, at first, unrecognized Risen Jesus, as the way the disciples were able to realize it was their Resurrected Lord, who was calling them to come in from the lake and join him on the shore. Again, it is possible both Luke’s and John’s events took place as they were written down but it is also possible the source for Luke or John or the authors themselves were unaware of the actual setting of the experience. I am personally inclined to see John’s account as the more accurate one and that Luke or his source were unaware the event took place as part of the call to follow the **Risen** Jesus Christ.

Today’s Reading has another mystery worth investigating. Matthew has two different summations of Jesus’ public ministry. The first of those two is in this Scripture and it seems to portray Jesus as continuing the preaching of John the Baptist. Prior to Jesus calling his first four disciples, Matthew is reported to say, “**From that time Jesus began to preach his message: ‘Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!’**” One of the reasons Jesus appears to be more like the continuation of the public ministry of John the Baptist comes from a common practice of many translators. Even though the original Greek manuscripts often don’t include the word “*sins*”, they nevertheless include the word in their English translations. The more accurate translation in this case is actually Jesus preached, “**Turn, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!**” **The turning Jesus was calling his hearers to carry out was and is the Transformation of their lives – of their bodies, minds, and spirits.**

“The message that Jesus embodies, F. Dean Lueking says, isn’t about judgment; it isn’t even about the light. Instead, Jesus is the light: ‘He is light and will give light, by his teaching and healing, by his suffering and his rising, and through the community of his disciples. ...’ Lueking calls this ‘a magnificent Epiphany message,’ but one that is ‘news that is both gut-wrenching and glad beyond all expectation.’ ... In Lueking’s words, ‘a countercultural force, untamed and raw, summoning us away from all easy ruts to the new life of righteousness.’” (Sermon Seeds Reflection by Kate Huey)

After today’s Scripture, Matthew gave his second and slightly different summarization of the focus of Jesus’ tasks in his public ministry. Matthew states, “**Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the Good News about the Kingdom, and healing people who had all kinds of disease and sickness.**” It is important to note Matthew’s description of Jesus’ message, following the gospel’s report about the call of the first four disciples, indicates Jesus preached “**the Good News about the Kingdom**” and demonstrated it by “**teaching in the synagogues**” “**and healing people who had all kinds of disease and sickness.**” Truly, Jesus’ message and ministry called forth Transformation to the New Life in Christ – the Life Lived by Christ! **You and I are called to be agents or instruments of that wonderful and amazing Transformation to the New Life in Christ – the Life of self-giving “agape” love toward one another and all people, who are in need of God’s forgiving, liberating, and healing presence!**

While discussing our calling as Christians, John Jewell shared the following, “one Sunday after a sermon on the fishing model of evangelism, a woman in our congregation said to me, ‘You know something, I hate fishing.’ She continued, ‘And as for fishing for people – I don’t have the kind of time available you talked about.’ She asked, ‘Does Christ have any place for a harried mom with four children?’” (“Discovering What We Were Meant To Do” by John Jewell) I believe Jesus’ answer to that question is for every believer to witness to the Good News and the Transformed New Life in Christ. To do that through the way we live our lives, relate with fellow believers and others in need of God’s Love and Care, while testifying with our own mouths, from our willing hearts and spirits, enabled by the Holy Spirit to share the Good News with those, who are willing to hear it.

So, we are called just like Andrew, Peter, James and John! **You and I are to come to the New Life in Christ and follow his example in our daily lives – to be Transformed and agents of Transformation!** Amen.