

EPIPHANY III

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

Mark 1: 17

So here they are, Simon and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John, all fishing on the shores of Lake Galilee. Probably they are all following family tradition – working the occupation of their fathers and father’s fathers.

Mark’s gospel is a streamlined story. We might expect that he’d combine the call of these four fishermen into one account. But he keeps them separate. Why? Partly, I imagine, to imply that the two sets of brothers don’t know each other; at least, they are not working together. Partly, perhaps, to stress to Mark’s audience that this is a critical moment in Jesus’ ministry. Listen up, folks! *If you missed it the first time, I’m telling you again, here’s what happens when Jesus calls his first disciples.*

But why does Jesus call this particular foursome? Why do they respond? Mark gives us no answers to these questions. What can the fishermen’s motivations be? Why would they abandon a familiar and secure trade? Mark doesn’t even suggest that these guys *have ever heard of* Jesus before, that his reputation might have preceded him.

Jesus does not explain his call. He issues a summons that sounds like an order – a summons without elaboration, without qualification. No marketing here, no loss-leader promises, no soft-sell.

And he doesn’t give much of a job description. Fishers of people? What’s that supposed to mean? And how’s fishing for people supposed to put bread on the table? Jesus seems to expect capitulation without explanation.

And, in this case, he gets what he expects. These guys *all immediately leave their nets* (and in the case of James and John their father Zebedee as well, *and follow Jesus*. No consultation, no request of a little more background information, no hesitation,.

Why, why, why? Why do the fishermen do what they do? Mark offers us no helpful clues. He does not suggest that they understand who Jesus is or what mission he’s engaging them in. Indeed, as we will see in Mark’s unfolding story, they consistently misunderstand Jesus, and vanish, temporarily, in his hour of greatest need, the great climax and crisis of his human endeavor: his crucifixion.

Why are they compelled to follow Jesus, whom they cannot understand? To go on a journey that will confuse and terrify them? To take of for a mysterious destination that will test them to the limits of their courage and loyalty, and beyond? *Why, why, why?*

Mark does not tell us. He only shows us.

Last Tuesday, how many people thronged to Washington, D.C. to attend the inauguration of Barack Hussien Obama? Final estimates to be determined, but approaching two million seems to be close enough. An historic number, on an historic day. Nearly two million Americans –many very elderly- standing in frigid temperatures for many hours to see our new president, to follow his progress throughout the day, to hear, in person, his words to all Americans and to the world. *Why? Why? Why?*

Now, unlike Mark's account of the calling of the fishermen, we heard plenty of explanations of why people thronged to Washington. All day, newcasters interviewed people on the streets. They gave many reasons – *first African American president*, or, *I'm proud of our country again*, or, *now I have hope*, And then there were those who just really wanted to see that helicopter door close behind George W. Bush. But all the reasons were really versions of the same reason: *I wanted to be part of this*.

In our business, we call this the Incarnation.

Mark's account of the call of the fishermen comes right in the first chapter of his Gospel. We haven't heard much about Jesus yet, and there's no hint the fishermen have, either. We have certainly, on the other hand, heard plenty about Barack Obama. But how many in Washington this week know, really, who he is?? How many have met him or talked with him or could say with personal knowledge and confidence that they know the essence of the man? How many of us glued to our televisions all day– the same question?

We can all give many reasons why this man and this event have so excited, transfixed, moved, and inspired us. My father once told me, memorably, that when someone gives you a number of reasons for something, you can be sure that none of them is the right reason. (He was talking about my ex-husband, of whom he had a very low opinion.) I would amend that observation to say that when someone gives many reasons for something, no one of them is the *only reason*, or the *only right reason*.

And somehow, all the many reasons, however myriad and however right and truthful, may add up to more than the sum of the parts. And even then, we may not- we will not, as St Paul tells us, *know fully*. *We know in part*. The essence of our inspiration

and our hope may remain, in the end, unfathomable— a mystery of the heart, a mystery of faith.

So Mark, in this story of the call of the fishermen, gives no reasons. He doesn't even try. He just gives us the call, and the response.

On Tuesday night, Inauguration night, we were rocking to the Gospel here at St John's. A few of you were here – I wish you had all been able to attend. We had a Gospel choir whose energy and talent set this sanctuary on fire with the Spirit – and a full house of, mostly, newcomers to our sanctuary who responded in kind.

Peter Terry, the extraordinary man with the angelic tenor voice who organized the event – whom many of you heard sing on the Sunday after the election – Peter and I went back and forth about whether there should be a sermon or not. And we decided, ultimately, not. The time would be filled with just a couple of prayers and a reading, and mostly music.

But at one point near the end, the director of the Boston Community Choir took the microphone. First, he chided us a bit about not singing with appropriate spirit, and encouraged us to get with the gospel program. Then he said, “You know, what the Man, what Obama said to us today was not about him. It was about us. What he was saying was, we have to manage ourselves better. We have to manage our own lives better. We have to be less greedy and less concerned with unimportant things. We have to serve! We have to serve! And if we can just get ourselves together, if we can just manage our lives better for ourselves and get into service, then this country will straighten out and be okay. That's what the Man said. “

And so, we had our sermon after all. A sermon that I couldn't have given at that time, to that congregation, but that rang out with authenticity, integrity, and a righteous call to personal responsibility and communal effort.

And a bit later I said, “How many people feel that you've been waiting all your lives for this moment?” Everybody raised their hands. Everybody. And so I said, “Well, multiply that by one hundred million, anyway. The hopes and fears of all our years are truly gathered here tonight.”

So I'm thinking. Maybe what was going through the fishermen's minds when they got up and followed Jesus was, *we have to manage our own lives better. We've been doing okay, but maybe not quite good enough. Maybe if we manage our lives a little better, this world will straighten out and be okay.*

Or maybe they thought, *we've been waiting all our lives for this moment. We didn't know it, exactly, we didn't imagine it could ever happen, and we're not quite sure what it is. But we've been waiting, and here it is, and what can we do but follow?*

Maybe they thought all those things, or maybe none. And maybe they thought – they probably thought – it was all about Jesus. And for a long time the story does seem to be about Jesus: his rhetorical eloquence, his powerful intellect, his healing power, the way he could inspire vast crowds and intimidate the most powerful folk in the land.

But in the end, Jesus is gone. Finally, Jesus goes back to God. And the disciples are left. And then, it's all about them. They have to pick up the pieces, the shambles and ruined expectations after the stunning disappointment and betrayal of Jesus' end. They have to remember what Jesus taught and did, and they have to discover, over and over, what he meant. They have to carry on. They have to change world. And they do.

As the Man said, *it's about us*, my dear friends, *it's all about us*. Alleluia! Amen.