

### EPIPHANY III

*And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."*

Matthew 4:18

Our propers for today all carry the same message: God will show us where we need to go.

*There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined, proclaims Isaiah.*

*You have been my helper; cast me not away;\* do not forsake me, O God of my salvation, cries the Psalmist.*

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God, Paul tells the Corinthians.*

And then the lovely story from Matthew about Jesus calling Peter and Andrew to become fishers of people. It's a story about Jesus beginning activity in his own vocation, after John has been arrested and put out of commission, as well as about his beginning to gather those who will accompany him on his journey.

Last week I did something I haven't dared to do for more than 40 years. I was over in Codman Square, visiting the Epiphany School, headed by the Reverend John Finley, who has celebrated and preached here a couple of times, most recently the Sunday after Christmas.

Also right outside Codman Square is the Oliver Wendell Holmes School, where I taught for most of my first year out of college, in 1968-69. A couple of years after Sam and I were called here, I got in the car and drove like a homing pigeon to the school, no mean feat, as I hadn't been there since 1969, and had spent little if any time in Dorchester in the intervening years.

Since then, especially in the last couple of years since my friend Cathy George has been working at two churches in Dorchester and I've been there more frequently, I have driven by the school.

But last week, after leaving Epiphany, I drove to the Holmes school and parked my car. My plan had been to take a walk in the neighborhood. Instead, I walked up the steps to the school and read the sign, which told me it's now an elementary school. I tried the door. It was locked. I started down the steps when a

lady called out to me from below, “Hey, you have to ring the bell now.” I did, and the door clicked open. I held it for the lady coming up the steps. “I taught here in 1968,” I told her.

“OH MY GOD,” she said. “I’m the nurse. 1968! You’ll have to meet the principal.

Now let me stop and explain about 1968. You’ve heard something about those days, though many of you were not yet born. I graduated from Radcliffe, I was married to a medical school student, and all of our male friends were avoiding the draft and Vietnam by going to Divinity School or teaching in fancy suburban schools.

I needed to support my husband, so I took a couple of education courses that summer at the University of Maine, while my husband was teaching tennis, and took the Civil Service exam. I got a very high score, not because I knew anything about teaching, which was not even addressed on the exam, but because I had a good education and was fairly smart. I was awarded a job at the O. W. Holmes. In addition to taking those education courses, I read Jonathan Kozol’s expose of the Boston School System, *The Way It’s S’posed to Be*, and tried to imagine what being stabbed would feel like.

And in September I began my teaching career, a 20<sup>th</sup> century version of a Christian sent to the lions, or, more modestly, of a non-swimmer thrown into deep and turbulent waters without a life preserver.

The Holmes was a middle school: grades 6, 7, and 8, and I was assigned 4 sections of 8<sup>th</sup> Grade English and 1 of 8<sup>th</sup> grade history. The grades were all tracked by test scores and, I suspect, by behavior, A through F, and I had A, C, D, E, and F, as I recall. 95 percent of the students were Black. 98 percent of the teachers were White. All the other novice teachers came straight from the then Boston State College, a “teachers college,” and within 6 weeks they had all either quit or adopted the disciplinary practices of the school, which involved silent classrooms of children doing textbook exercises, silent (in principle) straight lines in the halls, and administration of “the stick” for disciplinary problems.

I didn’t fall into either camp. I was against rote learning, and against corporal punishment. But other approaches were alien concepts to my students, who had experienced nothing else in their previous 8 years of school. So I, and

they, existed in a chaotic limbo. Rare was the day any class was quiet, or even under nominal control.

I have blanked out on many incidents – therapeutic amnesia, I would say– but I do remember the day the principal, whose office was right below my classroom, called on the intercom. “Twelve dictionaries just fell by my window,” he told me. “Please send someone down to pick them up.” What did it mean that the principal was looking out the window? That pretty much summed up his role; the vice principal, a wonderful man and one of only a couple of friends and allies I had at the school, ran the place, to the extent that it could run or be run.

But speaking of friends and allies, at home I was feeling more and more like a stranger in a strange land. My husband and friends had no way of comprehending my experience, and I would say were not very interested in trying. Their idealism was all focused on avoiding and protesting Vietnam, not on doing public service.

So something sadly predictable happened: I fell in love with a fellow teacher, and he with me. So the chaos of my life was compounded; it became personal as well as professional, and the two were inextricably intertwined. He was married too. At some point we left our spouses and moved in together. And then he left me to go back to his wife.

That was in March, I think. I quit my job and went home to live with my parents. Eventually he and I got back together, and eventually married, but that didn’t turn out well either.

So that year, 1968-69, was a very low point in my life. Perhaps the lowest, not even excluding the year I was pregnant and that second husband left me for our upstairs tenant. I was happily pregnant, at least, and knew before long I was well out of the marriage. But in 1969 I had failed at marriage and failed at teaching. My first serious experiences of failure.

Perhaps you will understand now why I had never gone back inside the O.W. Holmes School.

Last week, I did meet the principal, and she took me on a tour of the school. The students are still 95 percent Black or Hispanic, I’d say, but so are the teachers and staff. The halls and classroom are brightly painted, with murals. My own classroom was filled with quiet first graders, sitting in clusters. When their teacher

asked me how many students I'd had per class, I said probably 30. "How did that work?" she asked. "Not well," I told her. "I mean, how did you fit them in?" "The desks were in straight rows," I told her. The children looked incredulous, and so did she.

The principal told me she thought it was great that I'm a priest. She said she was a lay pastor at a Baptist church and was considering ordination, though she didn't know about going back to school after recently getting a PhD, or how she would pay for it. "Well, you have a ministry right here," I told her. "This is the mission field. And I couldn't do it. My daughter can, and I am proud and in awe of her." "Oh, I know," she said. "But you have found your vocation."

And I have, praise Jesus.

Jesus' early attempts at ministry were not always successful. The first time he preached, according to Luke, his listeners tried to throw him off a cliff. People in his home town rejected him. But he kept trying.

What my trip back to the Holmes taught me was that I have kept trying. And that it was helpful and healing to return to the place of that early failure, to face my demons, and to heal. I have a new understanding of the course of my vocation(s), the common threads.

I'll tell you the one thing I took proudly away from my less-than-a year at the Holmes. Every week, in all the English classes, I would put a title on the board and ask the student to write an essay or story with that title. For several months these were the most chaotic of classes.

*What we gonna write about?*

*This stupid!*

*Why you want us to write about our house? That none of your business.*

But by the end of my time, these were the classes they most looked forward to. They were the quietest classes. They wrote some wonderful stories, and eventually I mimeographed the best ones and made booklets for them to take home. They'd never seen anything like it: they were published! They were proud.

And I think from that they knew, in their own wild and well-defended way, that I cared about them. That in fact, I loved them. And I did. And although I wasn't paying much attention to my faith during that dark time, I believe I loved

them with a Christian love, a love not based on merit or mutuality, but on compassion, and awe, and a commitment to honor every human being. And a desire for them to know that they were loved, even in the midst of the chaos and poverty of their lives.

And that's the take-away, I guess, that's the carry over. That's what I still try to make folks feel, help folks know and believe. That you are worthy. That God has called you, and will care for you, and will love you to the end.

Alleluia! Amen.