

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Epiphany 3A) – January 26, 2014
Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Today in our gospel we hear about the newly baptized Jesus going forward in mission and calling disciples to join him. But what we see first is that his going out and going forward into the public arena begins, paradoxically, with a withdrawal. We will hear at the beginning of Lent about his withdrawal into the wilderness to face his temptations. But today's reading records another kind of retreat—a stepping back that comes from an unforeseen event, one that hurtles in on you from out of the blue—a “blindsider” as it's called. We hear in Matthew's gospel that Jesus “withdrew to Galilee” as if the breath had been knocked out of him by hearing the news of his cousin John the Baptist's arrest. Instead of launching his public ministry through some mighty evangelistic crusade—implementing some master plan to convert all the world to the Kingdom of God—Jesus pulled back. He needed time to re-group, to reflect on his purpose and call, now under a different set of circumstances, ones he didn't ask for but was dealt anyway. Arrests and executions are part of this whole thing, as will be the case for Jesus himself and his disciples as well—as we sing in the latter verses of the hymn, “They cast their nets in Galilee”:

“Young John who trimmed the flapping sail, homeless, in Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teeming net, head-down was crucified.
The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.
Yet let us pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace of God.”¹

So, the first thing we see in Jesus' public ministry is a pattern of engagement and retreat, encounter and escape, action and reflection, going forward and falling back. There is an unmistakable rhythm at work here, a back and forth that underlies both the spiritual life and public ministry of Jesus. This opening verse of today's gospel should make us all stop, look and listen. We need to ask ourselves, in our often frenzied devotion to work or in our general harried-ness and hurried-ness: what does “withdrawal into Galilee” mean for us? When do we need to pull back before going forward? Where is my “Galilee” and what must I do to get there? Whether in our plans at work, or in our family life, or as a parish, sometimes withdrawing enables us to see what should be done, to make plans, to gather energy—possibly to achieve much more.

The second thing we see in today's gospel is Jesus' coming to full realization that his mission of repairing the world, of proclaiming the Kingdom of God, could not be done by himself alone. He would not give in to the vain temptation of being the singular hero. He would involve others in his sacred mission, and the fishermen and others whom he would call as his disciples would become fishers of people to join him in his mission. This is the initiating moment of the Christian community as he calls others to discipleship, leadership and apostleship—inviting, forming, and sending forth.

But what does it mean to become “fishers of people?” It means that the call to follow Jesus is not simply for personal growth and fulfillment. We are called for others. One of

our Eucharistic prayers says it well, “Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.”

As various people have pointed out, there are two essentials to this fishing enterprise that need to be remembered. First, we need to see where the fish are and to understand their feeding habits, as it were. To fish successfully for people requires some skill. It helps to have some knowledge of what we’re doing; blind luck lasts only so long. Is the church understanding the people for whom it fishes, and their personal and cultural and social contexts? If not, we are sloppy fisherfolk. How often have churches offered either singular bait, as it were, to only the most rarified of species, or offered the unnecessary to the unwilling through myriad programs and liturgies—rather than offering many and diverse peoples a place of belonging and some spiritual sources to seek meaning and understanding and purpose? It’s a bit like the story of the mother who comes home from work one day to find her two older sons sitting on top of their little brother who was howling mad and crying. Asked to explain, the older boys said, “Well, you see, Johnny fell into the wading pool, and we are trying to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The trouble is, he keeps getting up and walking away!” The church sometimes acts this way.

This leads us to the second essential element in the fishing enterprise to which we are called, namely the practice of “catch and release.” Now I’ll be the first to say I am not a fisherman. After all, I’m the one who, when attempting to earn the fishing merit badge as a boy scout, caught only three of the five fish required for the merit badge; then put the three, wrapped up in newspaper, into my footlocker for several days, in the hot sun at summer camp, stinking up all my belongings. I’m the guy who consistently lost a hundred feet of fish line snagged on rocks or up in trees at various rivers in Connecticut. I’m the guy who “taught” my children to “fish” out in a row boat on a New Hampshire lake, by throwing the whole rod and reel into the lake on the first cast! The whole thing just flew out of my hand—blub, blub, it sank to 20 feet or so at the bottom of the lake. And there we were sitting in the row boat, my then young children looking at me, probably thinking, “Daddy, is that how you fish?” or, more likely thinking, “Daddy, are you nuts?” Well, anyway, I have heard—though I wouldn’t know—that one of the positive trends going on in sport fishing today is the practice of “catch and release.” The premise behind catch and release is that the fish are more valuable in the water than on the angler’s dinner table. Or as Yogi Berra might say, “It’s hard to catch fish that have already been eaten.”

Jesus said to fish for people—not “to eat” them. In our interactions with fellow parishioners and in the wider community, how do we “fish” and not “devour?” Let’s look at the ways Jesus did this. He never coerced anyone into belief. He also didn’t stop people from walking away. He called and he released. The call of the Gospel—the good news of Jesus’ ongoing mission of repairing the world and our part in it—is always a call of purposeful engagement, but also a call of freedom. As the good fisherman goes about his/her business quietly, we are called to passionately spread the good news

more by listening than talking, more by example than by speech. We are also called to a certain indifference about controlling the outcome of our efforts.

The need for action and reflection, the calling and equipping of a community of disciples, and then fishing for others with understanding and what could be described as passionate indifference—catch and release—these are some of the waymarks that emerge in today’s gospel. They are also marks of this parish family, I am glad to say.

In just four months in this parish I have been most blessed to have found a community of Christ’s disciples who have pursued with vigor both the outward journey of mutual care and service and the inward journey of prayer and reflection—a community of many and varied talents which has come together for building the common good here and beyond these walls. It has also been my joy to witness vitality, renewal and expansion of relationships and ministries involving newcomers and old-timers, albeit with a lot more room for growth. As our life and work and our human and financial resources continue to develop qualitatively—and quantitatively as a result—I expect we will move forward by addressing four challenges: first, the challenge of finding more effective ways to keep in touch with and between all the members of this parish, as well as to reach out to the wider world, better communicating our identity and mission, and inviting in others. Such a communications effort is already underway through electronic means, but also needs to continue with the fundamental building of relationships face-to-face and in small group settings.

The second challenge, related to the first, is to identify new leadership and renew present leaders—fisherfolk who have nets scattered in the parish and the wider community. The third challenge is to find ways to assure that our life together is marked by a wide-open welcome and hospitality, diversity, love and respect, and a deep sense of belonging and purpose. Again, this means finding more ways to deepen our spiritual roots and our relationships with one another in both large and small group settings, and to deepen our mission and ministry in the wider community. And the fourth and related challenge is to discern what God would have us do with these great facilities over the long-term, and to organize our human and financial resources accordingly to carry forward Christ’s mission in and from this location—after all, as Jesus said, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people”—rather than have you become mere “keepers of aquariums,” as Scottish church leader George MacLeod put it.

Again, I am deeply blessed to be in this community with you. So, let’s go fishing! Amen.

ⁱ Hymn 661, vv. 3-4 from The Hymnal 1982 (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation).