

Compelled to follow

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 22, 2017.

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.
Matthew 4:19-20

To visit the city of Jerusalem today you would like to think that you are walking in the footsteps of Jesus, but that is not the case. After the city was destroyed in 70 A.D. it was rebuilt along different lines. If you walk along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, you can be confident that you are where Jesus walked when he called together his first disciples. The essential landscape has not changed. It is in this setting that he called the fishermen to be his first disciples.

Andrew and his brother Peter came from their hometown of Bethsaida to settle in the town of Capernaum. The Hebrew for village is kefar and because it is named in honor of the prophet Nahum, it is kephar-nahum or Capernaum. It is here that Andrew and his brother, Peter, along with James and his brother John who were partners in a successful fishing business. It is here that you can see the remains of the large, roomy home where Peter lived with his extended family and where Jesus stayed at the beginning of his ministry. Nearby are the remains of the temple where he taught.

The location of Capernaum is significant in that it was a commercial and cultural crossroads, providing a means for Jesus' message to be spread far and wide. In addition to fishermen, there were also farmers, merchants and artisans all living in close quarters. Cordial relations with the Roman government provided Capernaum with cultural and economic advantages. Despite the centuries of conflict and change in that land, you can still feel Christ's powerful presence there. The shafts of light coming through the ever changing clouds, the soft breezes, the mountains in the distance, and the fisherman casting their nets out on the water take you back to that time and place where Jesus brought together his disciples to begin his mission.

Those whom Jesus called to follow him were simple folk. They were neither learned nor wealthy. They had no ambition for wealth or status, just the chance to earn a living to provide for themselves and their families. These twelve brave souls formed the close-knit community on which the church was built. Fishermen were used to working long hours under difficult conditions. They knew where to go to draw in their catch of fish. When Jesus asks them to join him, they are compelled to stop what they are doing, leave their families and give up their livelihood to be part of the mission of an itinerate preacher they hardly know. We can't help but wonder what compelled them to give up everything to follow this man.

I have heard evangelical preachers whose animated preaching style can be very compelling. They repeat an essential point in rhythmic style over and over again. People in the congregation keep up the momentum with shouts of "alleluia" and "amen." It reminds me of the apocryphal story of the woman in the balcony of a very staid church in Boston who was shouting "alleluia" as she waved her arms exuberantly during the sermon. A church usher was dispatched to go up and see what was the matter. "Nothing is the matter," said the woman, "I've got religion!" To which the very proper usher replied, "Madam, this is no place for that!"

By contrast, I will never forget the preaching of Dr. Theodore Ferris of Trinity Church in Boston whose very different style was no less compelling. His more conventional style of preaching made you feel that he was talking directly to you. Both preachers were very effective in their very different styles.

What compelled people to leave everything and follow Jesus was a combination of his authentic personal magnetism and their own need for what was missing in their life. When they leave their nets to follow him they don't know where they were going nor do they know how long they will be gone. It is not so much what Jesus does or says, but that he is totally authentic. He is someone they can believe and trust. He does not offer them a comfortable life nor does he offer any material rewards. What he does offer is a life of risk and sacrifice that is its own reward. While many of us would hesitate to accept such a challenge, the disciples welcome it. Of those twelve whom Jesus called together, all but one was martyred for what they believed.

What kept them together was the sheer dynamic energy of this man who preached a simple but very profound message that changed their lives. He gathered that band of ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

When you respond to God's call, there is no time for questions or hesitation. It may be the first time in your life that you are certain that you are doing the right thing. You use whatever skills or talents you have to be part of something very important and larger than yourself. The first requirement is to make the necessary changes in your life. Repentance in the Greek is metanoia, a change of mind, a turning around in a new direction. To repent is to reorient the direction of your life that takes you beyond yourself to a greater awareness others. A commitment like that requires reexamination of your values, your goals and objectives. It is your decision and no one can make it for you. Once we take Christ seriously in our life, we are never again the same. We gain a new center of gravity and perspective by committing to be part of the church that lives not for ourselves, but for those beyond our membership.

In the Holy Land, there are three Sabbaths: the Moslem Sabbath on Friday, the Jewish shabbat on Saturday and the Christian Sabbath on Sunday. During the Jewish Sabbath life comes to a halt in strict observance of the day to honor God. After the traditional three stars appear in the sky, all Jewish businesses are closed, no sports are scheduled, and no work of any kind is done. Imagine what it would be like for us to have a national weekly day of rest and observance with virtually no interference of any kind!

Just as the fishermen left behind everything to follow Jesus, we need to focus our lives and energies on what we do after we decide what we believe is important to us. From then on, it is a matter of making Christ's life our life and his values our values. In this time of national and economic uncertainty, there is all the more need for a source of hope. That hope was evident yesterday in the women's march that took place all over the country. They gathered together as a statement to uphold the dignity of woman who refused to be demeaned or exploited. It was an inspiring example of how each time we work together for what is right and just, each time we respond to God's urgent call, we are channels of God's grace.