

St James United Church

Message for January 21, 2024

Third Sunday after Epiphany



“Called into the World”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: 1 Cor. 7:29-31; Mk. 1:14-21; Excerpt from *I Keep the Land Alive* by Elizabeth Penashue

As a general rule, I turn to the Revised Common Lectionary to make selections for readings used in worship, shared as it is across denominations and around the world. I like that many of us are reflecting on the same readings on the same day. When we follow it, we hear mostly from one synoptic gospel across a church year with varying selections from John’s gospel. Sometimes this brings us two versions of a similar story, like this month as today we read Mark’s version of Jesus calling his disciples after getting John’s account of it last week.

I have colleagues who find it odd, but I like hearing these back to back stories. I like how it shows how different the gospels are, a reminder that each author had a unique group of people in mind as they compiled their version of Jesus’ life. I also find it affirming as we get two different ways that we experience Christ. For some it’s Mark’s version, an immediate response, often after hitting a low and they needed grace-filled intervention. But for others it’s more John’s, a day to day deepening relationship and only over time I see how I’ve grown.

Most of all, I like this double call because it underscores the two-fold dimension of Christian life. As I shared last week, a big part of faith experience is about relationships - one on one with Christ and with each other. As you know this keeps us coming to church, and motivates us to invite friends to come too. But we also keep coming because we take part in what a congregation’s doing in the community, uplifted as we reach out in love and make a difference in the world. It could be working with youth, caring for creation, advocating for affordable housing, helping refugees with English, running a warming centre when it’s cold. Whatever it may be, we take to heart Jesus’ message of peace and compassion, justice and love.

And this is the heart of what Jesus was saying as he told people the reign of God had come near, calling on them to repent and believe the good news. We often hear the word repent like it is directed toward a future heaven, but it’s about this life. This is the core of Paul’s message to the Christians in Corinth as he tells them to live with an expectation that Jesus’ return was imminent. Now he was wrong in his belief that the second coming of Christ was imminent. As a result it isn’t practical for all of us to live like we are celibate. But he was right to suggest to the Corinthians that they needed to focus not on the values of the world but those of God’s Reign. That is still what we are to do, our lives reflecting two loves - love of God and love of neighbour as we seek to shape a world where both loves are our foundation, where we do all that we can so people can flourish in their lives, and their dignity as children of God is affirmed.

We need to live that way because so often it's not what happens, our world in so many ways still shaped by the gospel as it was understood in Jesus' time. In his day, the word *evangelium* (the way a Roman would say good news) was a public announcement, something important to the empire. The biggest "good news" was that the Emperor Augustus had won the civil war. The victory, and its consequent peace, was memorialized on monuments so everyone would remember the "benefit" the *Pax Romana* brought them. But this *Pax Romana* came at a cost with soldiers stationed throughout the empire, high taxes that left many people in poverty, even at risk of being sold into slavery, a stratified social structure that kept most classes of people separate from each other and conveniently kept wealth flowing up to a small and powerful elite.

But Jesus came along saying the good news is not the *Pax Romana* but the Reign of God, a peace that comes not from war and ongoing oppression, but from love and a reshaping of how we treat one another. Jesus' call of Andrew, Simon, James and John points to this as they left their birth families (James and John left their dad in the boat, Andrew and Simon walked away from the job they'd been taught by their dad) and became part of a chosen family bringing a diverse group of people together, a wider sense of family where everyone was cared for, seen as children of God regardless of gender or status - enslaved and free, righteous and so-called sinners, rebels and collaborators, rural and urban, no divisions, a family without exclusion.

As you can imagine, this beloved community was a challenge to the ruling powers, the risk of his message hinted at in the reference to John being arrested. But Jesus didn't back down in what he knew was God's call, and neither can we, like Elizabeth Penashue who kept advocating for the land and her people's way of life even though she felt she was the only one who cared. At times doing what we know is right is like swimming against the current, but we do it because God's call has been placed on our hearts. That call is unique to each one of us, like the gospels written for particular communities. If I may paraphrase theologian Frederick Buechner, our call is where our passions meet the world's needs, where our skills intersect with another's struggle. We live out the call of the gospel as we use our gifts in service of our community. As we turn on our TVs, read the newspaper, walk around our neighbourhood we see many different issues, and we can't respond to every concern. But we can discern one need that we are passionate about and put our heart into it, knowing someone else is responding to theirs, and we often find there are others with a similar interest as ours, and want to use their unique skills as well. It isn't easy to put this into practice on our own, but like Jesus calling a diverse group together to live the gospel, here we have a supportive community where we can encourage each other to do just that as we follow God's call.

Whatever we choose to do, we respond to not one but two calls. One call is to nurture a relationship of love with God lived out together in community. The other is to go into the world to love our neighbours. We need both calls. As we pray, both alone and together, we return to the source of our love, keeping our hearts full. But then we are called to share our hearts with another, especially as we respond to the needs of our world. With each other's support, may we keep responding to both of these calls in our lives. Amen.