

Annual Meeting
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
24 January 2021
Jonah 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20

Last week our Lectionary gave us the call of the Prophet/Judge/Priest Samuel when he was a young child and was serving at the Temple under the old priest Eli. That same day we saw the calling of Phillip, who then brought his brother Nathanael to Jesus. We remember the interaction between Jesus and Nathanael and Jesus' promise that the Apostle would see great things happening during his ministry. Today, in the Old Testament we see the calling of the reluctant prophet Jonah, and in the New Testament, we see the calling of Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Jesus finds the two pairs of brothers amid the daily chores required by their profession as fishermen. We are told that Jesus immediately called them when he saw them, and they immediately left their family business to follow this mysterious preacher.

The word, "Immediately" here is very telling when you contrast it to the fascinating reading from Jonah. That reading starts with "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." Why a second time? Because when it came to him the first time, the prophet disobeyed the word, ran away to Spain, got thrown out of a fishing boat, got swallowed-up by a big fish, was vomited by the fish at the local shore, and was found out by the Lord, who gives him the time to clean-up before calling him again.

The word "Immediately" also places a contrast to the callings of last week. Samuel misunderstood the call several times and the voice of the Lord had to repeat his calling three times. He then was reluctant to give the message to Eli until the old priest insisted that the boy should tell him what the voice said. It was not because of disobedience but because of his young age, but it took a bit for Samuel to get on with the program. In the case of Nathanael, we see that he follows Phillip to Jesus, but first he acts doubtful. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Phillip must convince him to come. He says, "Come and see!"

But the Apostles today immediately leave everything behind and follow Jesus. No disobedience. No need for the voice to repeat himself 3 times. No doubts. No need for anyone to convince the rest to follow. They simply walk away and follow Jesus. I often wonder if this word "Immediately" is in this text for effect. I wonder if there was any fear of walking into the unknown when these men walked off their boats. I wonder if there was great guilt at leaving the elderly parents behind to care for their business without the men's help. I wonder if there was some hesitancy, some mental questions, some ambivalence. We know that Mark loves using words like "Immediately" often. As many commentators have remarked, Mark tells his story with an urgency common of a child narrating all the days events to his parents at the end of the day, "We went here and then suddenly we did this, and then immediately we did this, and then immediately with did

this other thing..." So, perhaps, there was some time for discernment among the Apostles, or perhaps they just left everything and followed Jesus.

Today we celebrate the Annual Meeting of our beloved church. Annual meetings are wonderful opportunities to ask several questions, but I tend to limit these to two categories: Identity and Mission. We must ask, "Who are we as a church?" "How has our identity been formed by over fifty years of corporate life?" "How can we celebrate who we are today?" "Is God calling us to a new identity that will make us better equipped to be his church in Northwest Houston?" These questions about our identity must be carefully answered and I invite all of you to reflect about this identity in all your Bible studies, Reunion groups, and ministry meetings this week. In many ways, I am the least able to answer these questions for you, since I just arrived less than a year ago, and by the time I walked in, your corporate history had been unfolding for several generations.

There are congregations who become the opposition. This is their identity. The clearest thing you can say about them is that they are NOT: They are not charismatic as their neighbors, they are not liberal as the downtown churches, they are not evangelicals as Virginia churches, they are not Anglo-Catholic as the great cathedrals of our denomination, they are not... (You name it!) They are different. Of course, they do not say this out right, but if you spend any time with them, you will hear the stories about how they separated from another group, how they were founded as a reaction to some movement within the church, or how they have purposely distanced themselves ideologically and theologically from some sinful group they secretly despise.

There are congregations who allow a specific ministry to define their identity: They are the "soup-kitchen church." They are the "Ambulant Ashes on street corners Church." They are the "Great Choir Church," etc. These activities are not just something they do, but over time they become what defines the church, to the point that without that activity the church would lose their sense of self. Sometimes the thing they can offer their neighbors is the pastor himself. We are the "Charley Smith Church." We are the Roman Roldan Church. "We have built a cult to the personality of our pastor and we broadcast our services to 23 international markets."

There are churches who become so enamored with their buildings and architecture that the association with the building becomes the very identity of the church. "We are the big church on Market Street. We are the church where president Homer Simpson worshiped. We still have his pew. We are the church with the big murals. Our art collection has been catalogued by the Smithsonian. Our Tiffany Windows precede Tiffany by 30 years..." We know what I am talking about. You've seen and belonged to these churches.

Today, we must ask "Who are we?" I would like to think of our identity in rather simple terms. I believe we are "A group of believers in love with Jesus of Nazareth." We have come to believe that Jesus of Nazareth makes all the difference in our lives. We are

a group of disciples who gathers week after week to give thanks to God for his call on our lives. We are people who bear the mark of Jesus in our hearts. This mark was given to us at Baptism when God accepted us as his own. We are baptized believers and everything we do is an extension of our baptismal faith that Jesus is the Messiah and that only he is worth following. We are followers and our job is to follow him into his mission field.

The second set of questions go directly to the issue of vocation or mission. “What is God calling us to do, given our identity as followers of Jesus?” “Where is Jesus’ mission field to be found?” “How do we prepare ourselves and our members to boldly go where few dare to go?” “What is preventing us from going where God is sending us to go, immediately?” “What do we do when we get there?” These are important questions we must answer. Some churches seek to place a Book of Common Prayer in the hands of every person they meet. Some feel called to share their sophisticated programs with others. Some want to convince the world that their priests are the best-dressed ministers in the world and their churches are amazing places to see and be seen. They are the center of political and social action in town. Anyone who is anyone belongs to their Episcopal Church.

I would like to think that if our identity is to be a group of people in love with Jesus of Nazareth, our mission should be to lead lives that honor Jesus and are obedient to his call in our lives. To love the world through Jesus, to preach his Gospel of salvation with our lives and words, to give of ourselves by befriending those who are alone, isolated, and in need. To withhold judgement and refuse a “holier-than-thou” way of being. To actively work for peace and justice. To love until it hurts, an activity that must include love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. To lead by example and live as servants of our Suffering Servant.

I know you were looking forward to an annual report, a state of the union address about our Church. I can summarize that report in 3 sentences: We have an incredibly faithful community who love the Lord and each other. Our staff has done an incredible job in 2020 under very difficult circumstances. And we are very excited about the possibilities God will send our way in 2021. As for now, I leave you with two important questions: Who are we? And Where are we going? May our Lord continue to bless you, Amen!