

Third Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/B): "Don't Interrupt Progress!"  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20  
January 23-24, 2021  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Excuse me, I'm sorry to interrupt, but..." "But I'm pretty sure **my** need for your attention is bigger than **your** need to focus on whatever it was you were doing **before** I interrupted!" When my sisters and I were little and would insist on our Dad's attention when he was in the middle of working on a client's tax return, he'd say (usually with a smile ☺), "Don't interrupt progress!" Our Lord Jesus is the One who "interrupts progress" (of the status quo) in today's Gospel!

The work Jesus interrupts is the business of fishing. Simon (Peter) and Andrew are in the midst of casting their nets into the sea, so they must be a bit out from shore, and I'm thinking the Lord probably has to **shout** to get their attention. James and John are in their father's boat, mending the nets, maybe with something like a giant crocheting hook and cord? Jesus basically barges into the middle of their work day. He invades their place of employment. He "poaches" Zebedee's two worker sons from right under his nose! He says, "Follow me," and they say, "Sure!"

It's a puzzlement. St. Mark gives us tantalizingly little detail. I long for some meaty dialogue like the Lord has with the woman at the well in John's Gospel. Had Simon and Andrew, James and John, heard about Jesus before He swung by their place of employment? This story is so early in Mark's Gospel, Jesus hasn't had a chance to do much, ministry-wise. As far as we know, He's only been baptized and driven by the Holy Spirit into the desert for 40 days, alone except for Satan, the wild beasts, and hospitality angels (Mark 1:12-13). What **else** did Jesus say to the two sets of brothers? Surely more than, "Hi, there, follow Me

and I will make you fish for people.” (Mark 1:17) Certainly they would have wanted to ask a **few** questions about where they were headed and what they’d be doing?!

This is one of those stories that’s so familiar we might zone out and not give it our full attention. We might treat those first disciples like paper-cutouts instead of real people. We might think, “Jesus says, ‘Follow me,’ and like obedient little ducklings or unthinking robots these guys drop what they’re doing and follow Him down the road. Of course.” But no, it was **not** a foregone conclusion that they would follow! Jesus **invited** them, he didn’t **hypnotize** them! These guys weren’t drifters. They were family men. We’re told that James and John worked with their father; fishing was the family business. And Simon Peter was married. We know this because later on in this same chapter, St. Mark tells us Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law of a fever (Mark 1:29-31). These men have community commitments. They leave those commitments behind to follow this charismatic rabbi who invites them to leave their literal boats and nets and join Him in the Big Catch, fishing for people.

That’s not just **them, then**. It’s **us, now**. We’re the latest in a long line of disciples, **beginning**, not ending, with them. We’re **also** invited to be part of the Big Catch, fishing for people. What a great reminder, this weekend of our annual meeting. We’re here for those who aren’t here yet! If we were only here to meet our own spiritual needs, we’d be a chaplaincy, not a church. We’re not called to be a “members only” country club. We’re called to be a mission outpost on the frontier of a secular society, holding out Good News to those beaten down by bad news, hope to the hopeless, forgiveness for those whose guilt holds them hostage, new beginnings for those who find themselves in an otherwise dead

end existence, community for those who long for a faith family and faith friends, opportunities to serve our neighbor, and lessons in living a fulfilling, God-driven life.

This past week I watched a You Tube video of our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and a couple other members of our ELCA churchwide staff talking about a new initiative called Future Church. They said Future Church is “not a ‘to do’ list but a ‘to be’ list.” It’s a renewed call to discipleship, setting priorities of being a **Welcoming Church**: Engaging new, young and diverse people; a **Thriving Church**: Rooted in tradition **and** radically relevant; a **Connected, Sustainable Church**: Raising the bar together.

Bishop Eaton reflected on a familiar conversation she has with Lutherans all over the country, in which the faithful ask her, “How do we get more youth and young people into our church?” To which **she** asks, “**Why** do you want to attract young people?” They predictably say, “They are the future of the church.” “They have energy.” “They’re going to keep the church going.” And she responds, “Those are all bad reasons. The only reason we should invite **anyone** to church is so that they, too, should experience this freeing love of God that we receive in Jesus, through His death and resurrection, and that’s just poured into us by the Holy Spirit... That’s the mission: so that **others** may know the way of Jesus which is the way of love, the way of reconciliation, the way of service, the way of justice. There’s no better call in the world than the call that God gives us to help people understand that their lives are saved and have been changed because of God’s love in Christ and the work of the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

That same Holy Spirit sometimes brings order from chaos, as in Genesis:

**1** In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup> the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God [the Spirit of God, the breath of God] swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup> Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

But it's also the Holy Spirit who was a holy, howling wind buffeting the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost, forever re-creating and challenging the community of faith. Sometimes the Spirit is like the mini-tornado on a city street corner, picking up the trash, whisking hats off people's heads, turning umbrellas inside out. Sometimes the Spirit initiates chaos to introduce and clear the stage for a brand new thing (check out Isaiah 43:19) -- **if** we're willing to be "interrupted," redirected from what we're already doing.

It's an ill wind that blows no good. One year ago at our annual meeting we discussed why virtual participation in the meeting was not feasible. Here we are, 12 months later, ready to launch our first **virtual** congregational meeting! We also discussed a year ago what steps would be necessary to livestream our worship occasionally. Poof! The pandemic descended, the lockdown occurred, and we were immediately livestreaming **all** our worship, which we intend to continue once the pandemic is over. Let's make "Don't interrupt progress!" our new response to those dreaded seven last words, "We've never done it that way before." Luther was emphatic that "whatever proclaims Christ" is what we need and want to be doing as individual Christians and as the church. May the Lord who has called **us** as surely as He once called Simon and Andrew, James and John, grant us grace to follow spontaneously wherever He leads, for the sake of the Kingdom and to the honor of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

<sup>1</sup>"Future Church": Update for Rostered Ministers, ELCA YouTube, 1/19/21.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham