

Sermon Eph+3B at the Annual Meeting January 21, 2024

Fr. Nick Smith

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 62:6-14

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

For nearly ten years now, I have been honored to walk this pilgrimage with you as we explored the grace of God and the leadership of Christ Jesus together. But a few months from now in November my path will diverge from yours, as I admit that age and fading ability are taking their toll on my usefulness to you. It will soon be time for me step aside and watch as you forge on ahead, while I turn to embrace whatever the Holy Spirit has yet for me to do. I would call my departure “passing the torch”, but it is, of course, Jesus who carries the torch, the light of Christ, and it is him whom we have all chosen to follow no matter where or when. I will be departing with reluctance, since I love you all so and hate to miss any adventures with you, but the rule is that when clergypersons step aside from a position, they must sever their presence with the parish, lest they interfere or confuse the pilgrimage of that congregation. So, for at least a year or two, I must take a vacation from our relationship while I watch Jesus lead you on your path of discipleship, and while I go my own way.

Just the same, our paths will likely cross either by accident or design, since the Bishop may permit me to continue as your District Dean, and I intend to continue my weekly worship at St. Margaret’s House, too, so I may run into you there. But I pray that Jesus and his eternal torch will lead this parish to blaze spiritual trails to places I would not have even imagined, and that your pilgrimage of revelation and discovery and love will continue uninterrupted. Hopefully with a new coach, but certainly with your own voracity and vision. It will be a time for tradition to write new pages in its diary, honoring the past, thanking God for what has been, what is now, and what will graciously appear. And it will be a special time for prayer, for listening to the wisdom of God’s Holy Spirit, for fellowship among Christ’s disciples, for faith and charity, and especially for discerning the faithful things to do.

In the scripture we read today from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus speaks for the first time in this text and preaches the shortest sermon ever, proclaiming that 1. The time is fulfilled, 2. That the kingdom of God has come near, 3. That all should repent, and 4. You can believe in the good news. Of course, historically, this sermon will be expanded and embellished by the rest of his life and teaching, but this is the basic and fundamental message. Together on our pilgrimage we have explored and considered his proclamations, and have practiced living in their light. As the eternal trail continues forward, you will find new embellishments. Sometimes the way will seem easy, other times not so much, I think. There may be protruding roots over which you might stumble; there may be inclement weather which threatens to obscure the path with snowdrifts or fog or whiteouts. But listen for the voice of Jesus to find the best direction and coax you forward; you are his sheep and you recognize his voice. He wants you to hear and heed his proclamations, and stay awake for his sermon.

The Sea of Galilee is not unlike Oneida Lake, about the same size and shape, though considerably deeper. Like Oneida Lake, it is subject to randomly difficult storms and active fishing despite them. Imagine Jesus walking by while we are enjoying our annual picnic service at Verona Beach State Park. Imagine Jesus passing by the marina while fishing boats are being backed down the launch slips. Imagine Jesus eavesdropping on the conversations from the Sylvan Beach restaurants as he walks on down the sidewalk. Imagine Jesus scratching his head in wonder and amazement. Imagine him courageously interrupting all the noise and commotion of shoreline people's lives to say "Hey, follow me and I will make you fish for people!" I wonder who might hear that invitation in their hearts, drop what they were doing and immediately gather around for the lesson to continue? Would we? Would you? Would only those bored with their humdrum lives? Would only those who were worried about the storm clouds over Frenchman's Island? What would motivate anyone to come and see?

Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, these four whom Jesus calls personally, have seen something in Jesus' eyes, have heard something in his voice, have recognized something holy in his presence, and they know what they have to do. They have no idea at all where Jesus will lead them, no idea how they will earn their living, no idea who Jesus is, let alone what to make of his bizarre promise that they will be angling for human beings! They don't even know his name. Yet they drop everything they are doing, leave behind everything which has sustained them, and, incredibly, follow Jesus into the unknown. Did they do it joyfully? Did they do it anxiously? Did they do it bravely? Mark doesn't say, but I suspect that if they had really known where all this would lead them, they would have been more that a little frightened and hesitant. If they could have foreseen the turmoil, the hardship, the heartache, they might have given the invitation a second thought. But, I think, they would have followed anyway, for they would have foreseen also the miraculous opportunity to be apprentices to the very Son of God.

What motivated the four fishermen, what I pray will motive you all even in my absence, is trust. Trust in God. Trust in the gracious godly Parent who creates new and abundant opportunities which we can seldom anticipate or imagine; trust in the Savior who preaches the shortest yet most profound sermons we will ever hear; and trust in the Holy Spirit who persists in spreading God's wisdom just when we need it most. Even when advancing age diminishes our physical ability to hear, we will still hear and recognize the Lord's voice. Even when our physical sight dims, as it must, we will clearly know the way forward following the light of Christ. And even when our memory slips, we will not forget the love we have known along our own seashores. And all of it leads us in the joyful direction of new life. Trust in the good news which Jesus proclaims, that as the time is fulfilled, as repentance and forgiveness are embraced, as the kingdom draws ever closer, we can believe in a brighter future full of new life. Trust that it is worth the wait and the effort. Amen.