

Sermon for Epiphany 3A at the annual parish meeting, January 22, 2023 Fr. Nick Smith

Isaiah 9:1-4 Psalm 27:1, 5-13 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 Matthew 4:12-23

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

Leave it to Jesus! Leave it to Jesus to say something thought-provoking, sincere, and inspiring. After all, he speaks God's undiluted word. And there, at the Galilean harbor, he selects two fishermen and tells them "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And overwhelmed by the authority in his voice and the promise of adventure in his metaphor, they drop everything and spread the word. Now, these were not amateur hook, line, and sinker fishermen; they had nets. And one wonders just what Jesus meant with this command. Or was it an invitation? What did they think when they heard it? They were commercial fishermen, suppliers to the retail trade, for whom fish were a commodity. If they were to cast their nets for people, what were they to do with their catch? Were they to separate the good from the bad? Were they to promise their catch some new and transformed life on an unfamiliar shore? No, just leave that to Jesus. Just gather up the aquatic harvest together, and leave the rest of the work to God.

We like to call the church the 'Body of Christ', for we presume to represent Jesus in our own time and generation, and take his mission and ministry for our own. But, in truth, what we do is to make ourselves available that Christ might be pleased to work through us. Left alone to make decisions and judgments and plans without the mind of Christ to guide us, we are but mortal pretenders. So we pray. And we listen. And we ask. We ask for something thought-provoking, sincere, and inspiring. And we best leave the answers to Jesus. This is the day of our annual parish meeting, a time to review the work we have done on Christ's behalf, and to consider what might be the faithful things to do during the coming year of our Lord. How shall we mend our nets? When shall we put out to sea? Where shall we cast our nets? How will we keep ourselves in shape for the effort? What have we learned about the currents? Do we still trust in the Lord to guide us? What are we being called to do now?

And as we look about from sea to shore, we notice that we're not the only fishing boat in the water this morning. There's a Methodist one over there with a hardy crew, and a Baptist one, one with a Presbyterian flag over in the cove, and I'm pretty sure I saw as many as two Roman Catholic ones, too. And some independent boats, too. But the thing is, out on these waters we aren't competitors, we're more like a fleet. It's all about the catch, isn't it? And we've had several opportunities to work together this year on projects like the Karing Kitchen, the Oneida Family fun-fest, the trunk or treat day, and the prayer walk, all things which have been meant to change lives for the better, thanks be to God. We have even worshiped together on Good Friday and Thanksgiving, the week of Christian Unity and the national Day of Prayer, proclaiming that this spit of land does indeed belong to God in Christ. That fellowship in his name continues to be a joy to us, and we wave to each other across the water with enthusiastic good cheer, wishing each other well, and thanking God that we have such capable partners in our mission.

With the agility only true sailors possess, we have had need to convert our fishing boat to a transport vessel during the last twelve months, as we have needed to ferry some of our company to that distant shore where they may rest in peace, far from the suffering and sacrifice of these regions. Carol Madonia, Sue Miller, Shane Weismore's grandfather Howard Williams, Suzanne Clark's brother Paul

Cox, and Judy Felshaw have gone on ahead to join others whom death have retired from our crew. We miss their company and their handiwork in our daily expeditions, but we smile through our tears, knowing that they now, in a more refreshing port of call, continue to go from strength to strength in the companionship of God and each other. And, as the Lord would have it, we have been able during these same months to welcome new hands on deck. We hope they know just how much they are appreciated, and how our crew is enriched by their companionship. They bring new perspectives to how we have learned the ropes and the knots of Christian witness and service. We helped God baptize five new young people to the cause at our parish picnic this year, and we pray that they will follow the Lord and keep their vows.

And while we are a brother and sisterhood instead of a retail fishing business, we nevertheless account for our assets and expenses as faithful stewards should. Jack the Treasurer secures the lock on our financial chest and keeps a sharp eye out for pirates as we keep a count of the value of our work. All of it, you know, you know, is a blessing and a treasure. As the bounty is received, we find that luckily we about break even, while still repairing our nets and renewing our sails. We pray that what we are doing pleases our great high Admiral, and gives him cause to bless our efforts. This year has seen the addition of a new computer and projector to the tools of our trade, and a new driveway and landscaping to make our harbor more inviting. We give thanks and honor to those who by their time and talent and treasure have contributed so generously to keeping us seaworthy.

As a blessing from Christ, our ark is propelled by the breath of the Holy Spirit in, on, over, under, and between our sails, and we are grateful for all those prepositions. And for all our sailors who complete the spiritual prepositional phrases, those who give of their time during our worship, on the altar guild, behind the camera, at the organ, over the computer, before the lectern, in the aisles, with the processional cross, around the altar, and for the quilt ministry. We are especially blessed to have crew members who are willing to give of their free time leading spiritual book studies, participating in our Care and Prayer team, managing our office and our website, maintaining our clothing donation box, delivering our weekly food donations, providing the fellowship of our coffee hours, leading Morning Prayer services, and so much more. It's a good crew. The best one I've ever served with, and certainly a model for all the fleet.

Now, you should know that I am grateful for this privilege to steer this boat, and for those who navigate when I am unavailable. Some might say, though, that my leadership style is too laid back, and a first glance seems a bit disorganized, that I have a problem with saying 'no' or even 'wait a minute...!' Well, let me assure you, it's not because I fear a mutiny, but only that I'd much rather say 'yes' or at least ask the question 'how? If we are truly going fishing together, we need to be creative and alert together. I chose to be at this helm, and requested that the great high admiral grant me this responsibility, because with his help, I do think I have a good sense which way the wind is blowing and how to negotiate the tricky shoals. And, listening to his orders, I think I usually hear on which it's better cast our nets. But any sailor can read Matthew 16:2-3 and know the difference between red skies in the morning and in the evening, so I always need your faithful, observant, and active help. So, let's cast off for another yearly voyage, secure in the knowledge that Christ is in the same boat we are...or rather that Christ is in the boat with us. Amen