

**Third Sunday of Epiphany B/January 24, 2021**

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20;**

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Jesus returns to Galilee after having been baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit and then being driven by that Spirit out into the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by Satan, among the wild beasts and after it all, cared for by the angels.

He returned from that journey, that journey of an inner, self-exploration, with a self-identity as God's Son, as beloved by God, and as one called to preach the *good news*, saying "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel (believe in the good news)!*"

And it was for this purpose, for the announcing of the good news that God's kingdom, God's realm, was at hand, was in their midst, that he then sought to call to himself, disciples, followers who would take on this work with him.

It would become their task to join him on this journey, to spread his message, to call the people to repentance, to the turning of their hearts, to the opening of their minds to a new day, a new way of being, and thereby to take on a new mindset. A mindset in which they could believe in the idea that God's realm was all around them, and that they might now live within a new reality that saw love as the common denominator, as the core value that could unite them with all other people. This was the *good news* they would take on as their own. This was the *gospel* they would spread across their nation, and eventually beyond, to all the world.

So it was for this purpose, that Jesus called those first disciples, those first 12 apostles. And Mark tells us that he began by calling two brothers, Simon and Andrew. And after that, two more brothers, James and John. And I wonder a bit, why Jesus would first call brothers?

I suppose there might be some advantages to calling brothers. Here, these men were fishermen and had worked alongside each other for some time, maybe their whole lives since they were children. Mark even tells us that James and John were still working for their father, Zebedee. And there would certainly be some advantage to having men who had worked together for a long time. They knew each other, they worked together as a team and each knew his role and his tasks and knew what to expect from his brother and knew what his brother expected of him. Calling brothers makes a lot of sense.

But Kate asked me, as I was thinking about this message, how would I do if I was called to work alongside *my* brothers? And I began to think about growing up with my two brothers, Steve and Scott. Now, I came along a bit later, 6 years after Scott was born. So the two of them were really the team that worked together.

I recall hearing about my brother's younger years. It wasn't so much *harmony*, as, well from the stories they told, you might call it "*war*"! There was the time Scott hit Steve on the head with the big metal Tonka truck. Yes, and the time the two of them tore the head off of our older sister's new doll. Of how Steve fell out of cars, fell out of trees. Of how Scott would help our Mom chase after Steven when he did something wrong and would take off down the block (Steve actually grew up to become quite a runner!). Or of how they laughed when Mom tried to spank them with a wooden spoon and it broke! They were the classic model of a "sibling rivalry." Mom had her hands full! And by the time I came along, the peace had basically been made. And for me, my two brothers were great teachers. Steve taught me to run and Scott trained me in the skills of football and basketball. Although we still had our spats. I recall the time the three of us were home alone and Scott perturbed me, egged me on, to the point that I chased him into the bathroom, him laughing all the way, and then me kicking my foot into the hollow core bathroom door as he shut it behind him! Suddenly the thought was not about getting even with my brother but about what our parents would say when they came home! But no matter what spats we may have had, what disagreements might pit us against each other, we were always *brothers*. We shared a bond that went deep into our sense of who we were and always held us together, united in the love we shared as family. A bond that could never be broken.

I believe Jesus wanted to tap into that *bond*, that unbreakable bond that these brothers shared. But he would then stretch that bond, teach them to see that they were meant to feel that bond with all people. That they were part of a *wider* family. Jesus would be calling them to expand the parameters of who they thought themselves to be and of who truly were their brothers and their sisters, their family. Even to the point that he would tell them they must *love their enemies*. And just as Jonah was called to preach a saving message to those he hated, to open his hardened heart, calling those despised Ninevites to turn their hearts to God and thus be saved, so would they be called to unite all people and to share the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood with all in *God's family*.

This would be what it meant to follow Jesus, to be part of this new *kingdom of God*, this *realm of God*, this *family of God*. It would be a family united in the love of God. It would supersede every other bond we might have and overcome any label or category, every division that might separate us from each other.

In today's reading we heard Jesus calling out to those first disciples, "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people*." Now the older RSV states it differently. It reads, "*Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men [people]*." The first speaks of a *task* that they will be called to do. "*I will make you fish for people*." The second speaks of an *identity*. "*I will make you become fishers of people*." Jesus was indeed calling them to a change in their identities, to become something new. To leave the old behind and journey with him into a new reality, a new way of being, knowing a *unity*, a oneness with all others in God's family.

This past week, I was moved by the Inauguration and to what our new President, Joseph R. Biden, was calling us to. In his address he stated: *"To overcome these challenges - to restore the soul and to secure the future of America - requires more than words. It requires that most elusive of things in a democracy: Unity. Unity."*

He went on to say: *"But the answer is not to turn inward, to retreat into competing factions, distrusting those who don't look like you do, or worship the way you do, or don't get their news from the same sources you do. We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal. We can do this if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts. If we show a little tolerance and humility. If we're willing to stand in the other person's shoes just for a moment."*

And the young, 22 year old Amanda Gorman, the first National Youth Poet Laureate, in her poem entitled, "The Hill We Climb" shared these words: *"And yes we are far from polished far from pristine but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. We are striving to forge a union with purpose. To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man. And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us but what stands before us. We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside. We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another."*

This is the journey we are being called to as Americans: To *Unity*. To *forge a union with purpose*.

This is the journey we are being called to as brothers and sisters of faith: To leave the old behind and journey with Jesus into a new reality, a new way of being. To become one family within God's love and truth.

I end with these stirring words that closed Amanda's poem: *"The new dawn blooms as we free it.*

*For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it."*

May we become that light.

Amen.