

## **SERMON- Epiphany 3 (A)**

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Isaiah 9:1-4

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

**St. Timothy's (Herndon)**

**January 19, 2023**

Psalm 27:1, 5-13

### **OPENING:**

Jesus left and made his home in the territory of:

“Herndon Station in the Dranesville District of Western Truro Parish.”

As he walked by, Jesus saw David Johnson, a music teacher and Preacher's Kid, and Jesus saw Mary Castleman, Confederate widow and headmistress and he said “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

I am trying to imagine the scene from 150 years ago, when St. Timothy's began. How Jesus called out to these folks to follow him, and they said: “we are going to build this church.”

I tried to model it on how Matthew reported it 2000 years ago in Galilee. You'll notice that I used antiquated place names for our geography because Matthew did too. When he called Galilee “Naphtali and Zebulun,” it would be like us calling New York City “New Amsterdam” or calling Istanbul “Constantinople.”

Matthew does this because he's interested in linking the present to the past. He wants to emphasize the connection between the Old Testament and what's happening with Jesus and the disciples. We don't really understand the reference—they just sound like places we have never been to—but those in Matthew's community would have. The places ‘Naphtali’ and ‘Zebulun’ would have summoned up the ancient prophecy of Isaiah, and what God had promised in the way of salvation.

Maybe Dranesville and Western Truro mean nothing to you, or maybe they fire some latent synapse in your brain which connects what we are doing here to some distant past that is not actually that distant.

It might mean then that we are not alone and we are even in good company.

It might remind you that people have been up to this sort of thing for a while, 154 years in our case. And we continue the work today with our Annual Meeting and with our Vestry Elections and a fried chicken dinner that cannot be beat.

So Jesus makes his home here in the county of Fairfax, at St. Timothy's Church, he walks by and says “Rick Wilson, Midori Yanigahara, Jan Lyons, Matt Schumann, and Vilma Lemus....”

...Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

Our vestry slate of candidates has been called, just as the sets of fishermen brothers were called back in the day, just as the founders of this church were called.

And you and I are called.

## GOSPEL

Matthew, unlike the other Gospel writers, highlights the irresistible nature of Jesus’ call. The others mention how the would-be disciples already knew Jesus or that they already witnessed his miraculous healing, Matthew emphasizes the mere presence of Jesus. He called, they answered.

That’s actually a more difficult reading than the others, we want a scenario where we CHOOSE to follow Jesus, we pick Christianity out from the religious buffet, we go to St. Timothy’s because of x, y, and z.

But what if instead it’s God choosing us. What if it’s more of a *fait accompli*.

What if “The one whom we choose is the one who chose us first.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s actually a terrifying proposition. We would much rather have the autonomy and control. To say that we decided to go to this church, that we launched this program, that we issued this Annual Report that lists our accomplishments. But what if God chose it for us. Again, that’s kind of scary but also incredibly liberating.

A story from my church growing up:

one year, for our vestry election, my church decided that instead of having the person with the most votes win, they put one spot up to chance. The idea comes from a reference in the Old Testament to something called *Urim and Thummim*. I am not making this up, it’s in the Book of Samuel, the Book of Exodus, where the priest would have these two objects on his ceremonial breastplate that he would use to make decision-making, to divine the will of God.

In other words, they were going to roll the dice and let God decide who is on the Vestry.

Guess who got elected? My cantankerous Father. He said he never would have gotten elected otherwise.

I am not saying we should do that, we are going with majority wins.

But it’s helpful to think about God infusing everything we are doing, our vestry elections, our budget, whether or not the copier goes down or the boiler breaks.

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R. A. 1993. *Matthew*. (Interpretation Series) Louisville, KY: John Knox, 31.

## FISHING

Our reading from Matthew speaks to that idea through the metaphor of fishing. and with that another story from my church where I grew up at.

When I was 8 years old, my church had a Blessing of the Toys on Christmas Day, where you would bring toys in, carry them up to the altar kneeling, and the priest would bless them. One year, my brother and I brought our spanking brand new fishing poles, rods and reels, up to the Holy of Holies.

And the priest said,

“God Bless these fishing poles, that these twins will follow you and learn to fish for men.” (No politically correct language back then!)

Great blessing, fast-forward 30 years to only find out, when rereading this story, that the fishermen in Galilee did not use fishing poles but rather large nets, that would be cast down to the bottom of the sea and then pulled up.

It changes the whole complexion of the scene: rather than God reeling me in, because I am so wonderfully, uniquely special. Instead God is casting this wide net, and he is going right to the bottom, to get the bottom feeders. To use them/ us to build his kingdom.

Again, that’s liberating but also scary.... That God is willing to take just about anyone, the catfish and the carp and the cod, to do his work.

I kind of fashion myself more of a blue marlin or prized mahimahi

I kind of fashion our vestry that way. Our slate of candidates stands before you as some of the best we got. We worked hard to put a good group on your ballot, but I also hope that we got out of the way and let God do the sorting.

What if we trust that God has got us in his net. What if we trust that I am not the most gifted Rabbi, that you might not be a marketing genius, that you are not an experienced community organizer, or have the deepest pockets to give.

Instead Jesus called the fishermen, or a tax-collector, and even an enemy of the church in St. Paul or even, “women.”

Those are the people that built Jesus’ church.

And the ones that built this one.

Mary Castleman was a single mom with 5 children, her husband had been murdered a few years before in a story worthy of a Dateline special. She somehow was convinced to take the train out from Alexandria here to the train stop that was Herndon and fish for people.

David Johnson, again, was a lay person, described by someone who knew him as “very kind and attentive” as a teacher” but religious to the extreme and kind of

peculiar.” His wife was described as “fair, fat and forty.”<sup>2</sup>  
Maybe not Bottom feeders but not church planters *par excellence*?

## CONCLUSION

As a reminder, our patron St. Timothy’s Feast Day is coming up this Thursday, and if you remember, Timothy was not the most promising of missionaries when he was called.

One more story to close: we used to live in New Orleans, Louisiana, where there is actually a large Jewish community there, one of the largest in the American South. I once was talking to a Jewish person about the different synagogues up and down St. Charles Avenue.

And human nature being what it is, this woman told me that people who go to the synagogue with her sometimes refer to their particular rabbi as kind of like an “action figure” who they wield in play competitions with other rabbis in the city. So, in conversations, the people who go to this Synagogue talk about their Rabbi who can do this, but then another person counters that their Rabbi down street, though, he can do.

In other words, they are exactly like Christians and our navel-gazing and petty rivalries.

Last year at this time, St. Timothy’s you did not even have an action figure, no priest.

This year you got this goofy one, a nice guy with a beard, nice family, who has never done this before, no experience in church rebuild.

That’s better than no priest, no action figure to duke it out with

But the scarier thing is what if it’s God choosing us, choosing us “St. Timothy’s”. Telling us “you are back.” Telling us that all the things we say that we believe on Sunday morning are true. That God has chosen us for this task before us, not because of our unique qualities but just because God chose us.

That’s what keep me up at night. And keeps me going in the morning. Not that the pledges won’t come in, or the people won’t show up. What if there is a God who actually has chosen us to do the very thing that we profess. That’s what keep me looking over my shoulder, straining to hear that voice, listening for that call. **AMEN**

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<sup>2</sup> [herndonhistoricalsociety.org/images/Narciso\\_Gonzales.pdf](http://herndonhistoricalsociety.org/images/Narciso_Gonzales.pdf)