

SERMON- Epiphany 3(B)

Charles R. Cowherd

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

January 21, 2024

Mark 1:14-20

Psalm 62:6-14

OPENING:

I was in my office at church this week, minding my own business, doing my job, when I got a CALL.

This phone CALL was from the Virginia Senate, the Clerk's Office, saying that yours truly had been nominated to give the invocation for the Opening of the General Assembly.

Not quite Jesus CALLING the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, but you take what you can get. Honored and flattered, I set up a time for me to have my moment to shine.

The next day, I was in my office at church, minding my own business, doing my job, when I got another phone CALL.

This CALL was from the Virginia House of Delegates, the Clerk's Office, saying that yours truly had been nominated to give the invocation for the Opening of the General Assembly.

Slightly less honored and flattered, I said that I had already made plans to come to Richmond and I was not sure if I had it in me to make two trips.

She replied by explaining, patiently, the nature of our bicameral state legislature and that, although Delegate "So and so," had nominated me, there were many other folks on the list and they were sure to find someone to give the prayer.

ANNUAL MEETING:

Next week we will have our Annual Meeting and I will announce that one of my priorities and focuses for 2024 is how

we as a **parish** handle this election year,

how **we** deal with the competing demands of **our** civic life and spiritual life,

how **we** as **St. Timothy's** hear and answer Jesus' call when so many others are made upon our lives.

The details around how we can approach this difficult and important year of 2024 will be laid out more fully next week in Henry Hall over chicken lunch.

For now, let's look at Jesus' Call of the four Disciples at the start of Mark's gospel as our guide, juxtaposed against the phone calls that the church received this week.

GOSPEL:

The first thing worth saying is that notice how my emphasis remains on us as a community. That is to say, I am less interested in how you participate in our civic life as an individual, what political party that you vote for, whether you yourself indeed votes.

Now those are important. Full stop.

However, what I am more interested in is what we as a church do. What we as a community can do together. How we can support one another, how we can be God's light in the world. In the words of the Collect "give US grace" that "WE may perceive the glory of his marvelous works" and "proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation."

To that point, notice how in the Call stories in our reading, there is no personal psychology involved among the disciples. There is no inner introspection of whether or not they should join Jesus. Peter and Andrew and James and John do not become 1st century 'Hamlets on the Galilee' agonizing over this call.

The Gospel, the author Mark, is not interested in that question. What's important is Jesus' powerful and loving gaze, it's the command that he has over the prospective disciple. It's the miracle of obedience that that call provokes.¹

So: "Mark refuses to reduce *Metanoeite!* to a privatized response, as though the invitation of Jesus involved 'just me and Jesus.' Mark will have none of that. 'Believing the gospel' is a group effort. Christian life is lived in community, always in community, no matter how many blemishes or scars."²

In other words, going back to the phone call, let's not treat it as a modern-day parallel to Jimmy Stewart's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

My invocation will not be *The Reverend Cowherd Goes to Richmond*.

Rather, in some way, we are all going. You are coming with me.

In a previous sermon, I talked about the phenomenon of the priest/rabbi/ imam as 'Action Figure' that one can brandish as evidence of your righteousness.

I am not going to do that for you. What I will do, in 2024 and in all years, is walk with you throughout this year, guide you, learn from you, cajole you, provoke you, make mistakes with you, as we go about our democratic experience.

¹ Marcus Joel. 2005. *Mark 1-8 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven: Yale , 183

² Gary W. Charles. "Homiletical Perspective." In Cynthia Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds. 2014. *Feasting on the Gospel- Mark*. Louisville: Westminster, John Knox: 25.

It will be done in community, it will be done as a parish, as a church.

In other words, the movie would be called:

St. Timothy's Goes to Richmond and the General Assembly.

CALL

Now, admittedly, we do walk into the voting booths as individuals, we generally write checks as individuals, and we generally express our opinions as individuals.

And the history of Christianity has a long stream of solitary heroic individuals, deciding to follow Jesus.

Take St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and his story of spiritual conversion which is widely seen as the invented the autobiography. Then trace that line to the stories of Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr., and on down the line, as examples of courageous individuals, struggling within themselves and coming to an understanding of call.

Not to forget St. Paul's Damascus Road conversion, seen as a personal and individual interaction with God.

But it's not really like that. Not entirely. There is always a community around you. Peter had Andrew, James had John. And vice versa. Paul had a community, so did MLK and all the rest.

In my call process, I had more people poking and prodding me than I would care to admit.

You have the people in the pews sitting next to you. You have myself and Todd and Mother Philene and a committed vestry helping to answer the call with you. To listen and hear it and to respond.

And if you are looking around and saying: "I don't know anything about these people who are next to me." OR "I know too much about these people next to me... and I don't want to be involved in any group effort."

That's okay, that's a good place to start. We are no better than the combination of fishermen, tax collector, zealots, and Pharisees that joined up with a carpenter. An unpromising community from an uninspiring dusty village and lake.

That's called the church.

POLITICS:

Notice how the disciples, with apologies to the popular wrist band, they never ask: "What Would Jesus Do." Instead they follow him.

The person they follow was tough to keep up with, a shifting and confounding

presence.

Every few years a new book appears and is a best seller, that has on its cover in splashy graphics:

“Jesus the Zealot—How Jesus of Nazareth was actually a political revolutionary.”

The next one, published, will say the opposite:

“Jesus the Mystic—avowed pacifist, contemplative who had no political agenda.”

The truth is both in between and all those things.

Jesus absolutely had a political agenda, and it was to upturn the political establishment to establish God’s kingdom on earth.

It was a nonviolent, uncompromising, impatient, loving, all-encompassing, sacrificial call no our very selves.

God so Loved the world that he did not care as much people wanted Him to be about the Temple, or about the Law, or about who was going to be elected.

CONCLUSION:

It's all very hard, I will admit.

It was hard in Jesus’ time, it’s hard in ours, it will hard in our children’s lifetimes.

It's harder for you actually. “Priests actually take the easy way out, because they make a declaration where they stand and where their identity is. Lay people have to straddle between the church and the world, declaring themselves to be a part of both.” “Those in the pulpit may know where they belong, but the people in the pews hold dual citizenship. When they come together as the church, that is where they belong—in God’s country, which is governed by love. But when they leave that place, they cross the border into another country governed by other, less forgiving laws—and they live there too.”³

I am gratified that we have people in this congregation who are the CEOs of organization around food insecurity, and affordable housing, and who are diplomats and defense contractors and mental health professionals. Let’s use this year to draw on our shared resources and our vocations that God has called us into

But, since it is so hard:

Let’s start easy, with an election of vestry officers this morning. 4 Candidates for 3 Vestry

Let’s start easy, with a prayer in front of our elected leadership in Richmond.

Let’s start easy by getting to know the people next to you, to the right and to the left, who all share the same call to follow Jesus. **AMEN.**

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown. 1993. *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge: Cowley, 26.