Homily for 5 Epiphany, Year C

February 6, 2022

S. Stephen’s, Providence

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We find ourselves this morning halfway between Epiphany and Lent.

In this liturgical time,

we will hear each Sunday of the beginnings of Jesus’s earthly ministry,

and today, the calling of the disciples.

When it comes to the call of the disciples,

I’ve spent a lot of time pondering what it must have been like –

what it would have been like to leave everything

all to follow and accompany a rabbi

as he went about teaching and healing in the towns and villages of Galilee.

All the Gospels give a sense of urgency

when describing the disciples’ first encounters with Jesus.

They all make it clear that the disciples left what they were doing –

their jobs, even their families –

all to follow Jesus.

Such is the urgency of the Gospel – the Good News of the Kingdom

that Jesus is going about proclaiming and teaching.

It demands our attention here and now, and cannot wait,

the Gospel writers seems to be saying.

If you recall from a couple weeks ago,

Jesus is in his hometown synagogue,

where they had all known him since he was a boy.

He gets up and reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah,

and proceeds to tell them

that the scripture has now been fulfilled in their hearing.

Jesus announces the beginning of his ministry,

but the people are so outraged at his perceived blasphemy

that they drive him out angrily and nearly kill him.

Great start.

I can only imagine the headache for Mary, as well,

as she perhaps had to deal with the fallout and the stares from villagers

after Jesus made himself scarce.

This morning, we encounter Jesus with another crowd,

one that is far friendlier to him than his hometown.

He is by the Lake of Gennesaret,

and we are told that the people are pressed around him

so that they may hear the Word of God.

Jesus is clearly a charismatic man,

and the words he utters

are clearly words that make people stop and think –

they speak directly to their hearts and souls.

What profound wisdom and insight from this 30-year-old rabbi.

Such a crowd would not have escaped the notice

of fisherman on that same lake –

Simon Peter, James, and John.

As they go about their daily routine, cleaning some nets,

they have no idea of the wild roller coaster of a ride

that their lives are about to take.

This man who will enter their lives

will fill the next three years with incredible miracles and healings;

they will be taught by the Divine Word himself

about what the Kingdom of God looks like.

I wonder if we can place ourselves in the story this morning.

Can we imagine ourselves in the disciples’ place?

Into the ordinariness of our every day lives,

the relentless grind of another day’s work,

someone different steps in.

Perhaps we’re a bit skeptical of his presence at first –

we’ve seen charismatic leaders before:

they come and go, and their promises are usually empty.

But this man – well, he’s different.

His eyes seem to see everything,

and there is a confidence and certainty to every word he utters.

There’s a feeling we get as he speaks to us and looks at us,

but we can’t quite put our fingers on it – a magnetic pull,

but something even more than that.

What we don’t yet know or understand,

is that we’re in the very presence of God.

Now of course, beyond the feeling the disciples surely had

in the presence of Jesus,

this morning he actually does something that also convinces them

to take notice.

These fishermen have been working hard the previous night and day,

with nothing to show for it.

Their nets are empty.

Jesus boldly steps into their boat and asks to be taken out into the lake.

On one hand this is practical,

because Jesus can be seen and heard by more people.

But Jesus also has something else in mind.

He tells them to lower their nets into the deep water,

despite their protests that they’ve already tried catching fish there.

Yet, they say they will do as he commands, and they put their trust in him.

Maybe they were just humoring him,

but their skepticism soon turns to amazement and wonder

as their nets are overflowing with fish.

Not only do they suddenly have work, food, and money for today

but for tomorrow and the next day as well –

and their newfound abundance will spread to the community as well,

as they in turn have food and sustenance for today and the next day.

The Kingdom of God is like that –

it feeds and nourishes, and surprises with its shocking abundance,

just when we thought our labor was in vain,

and there was nothing to be had.

Jesus says, essentially,

“If you think that was neat, I’ve got even more to show you –

greater things are in store. Come and follow me.”

And they do.

You and I are likewise called to be disciples.

When we read and hear these stories of the first disciples,

we are supposed to hear the same call to us.

We may not be fishermen, and we may not be standing

in the physical presence of the person of Jesus,

but the call is there just the same.

The urgency is just as real.

Perhaps you identify with the situation of those fishermen on the lake:

we are tired and worn out with our labor,

and perhaps frustrated with the fact that it is bearing no fruit.

Into that place of fatigue and fruitlessness,

Jesus enters in.

His words and his presence are balm,

and he says to us “Cast out that net again,

but this time put your trust in me.”

When we ground our love and our labor in God, and trust in his Word,

the results will always be different.

We will discover rich abundance in the very same places

we thought barren and dead.

When we ground ourselves in the word of God and his kingdom,

we discover that there is abundant life to be had by all.

Unlike the first disciples,

we may not be called to sell our cars, our homes, and all our possessions,

even leaving our families of origin behind –

but we are still called to give everything.

We are called to give Jesus our hearts and souls and minds.

We are called to use our bodies for the work of the Kingdom.

We are called to ground our entire lives

in his way of seeing the world,

and of his way of being in the world.

It’s not easy work! It can be hard at times.

We may, like Simon Peter, want to throw up our hands and say,

“Lord, I am a sinful man! Depart from me!”

But Jesus does not let us off the hook.

He will always come back for us and say, “No – you are beloved.

I have you – simply put your trust in me, and follow where I lead.”

Like the first disciples, when he stepped into their boat,

we can have no idea what will lay ahead of us.

Once we decide to follow him,

we can only simply put our trust in him,

knowing that whatever befalls us,

in the end, God’s kingdom and God’s love prevail.

Those simple fishermen – Peter, James, and John:

they will give everything to him,

only to see him betrayed and murdered.

They will think that it was all for nothing,

only to discover that it’s only the beginning.

Jesus’s Resurrection from the dead

will see their lives upended anew as they work to spread the church,

to the furthest corners of the known world,

even the very seat of power of the same empire that crucified their Lord.

This Resurrected Lord who stepped into their small boat in Galilee,

will, with them, turn the entire world upside down,

and leave no part of the earth untouched.

So come, and hear his voice calling to you, “Follow me.”

But be ready – it can be one roller coaster of a ride.

Amen.