

Sermon: Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Please be seated.

I

It is a blessing to stand here today and offer my thoughts to you, on my first Sunday as your Priest-in-Charge. That was meant to be last Sunday, but the Holy Spirit, as we are told, moves in mysterious ways!

When I prepared my sermon for last week, I was struck by how appropriate some of the lines were for beginning a new ministry. We heard Isaiah talk about the Lord “forming him to be His servant”. The Psalm spoke of “proclaiming righteousness in the great congregation.” Paul wrote to the Corinthians about their being “called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And the Gospel described John the Baptist witnessing “the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove.”

And then, it snowed. But I will refer back to these readings, as they all tie in with the readings for this week.

Though, I have to admit, all the talk of the Spirit descending, and messages of salvation and deliverance makes us realize what we are called to live up to. But I continue to pray that the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts will be now and forever acceptable in God’s sight.

II

And on a day like this, - especially after last week - one can be grateful to have made it at all! In his *Journey of the Magi*, T.S. Eliot wrote: “A cold coming we had of it, / Just the worst time of year / For a journey, and such a long journey: / The ways deep and the weather sharp, / The very dead of winter.” Well, here we are.

But, as the Magi found out, it was not all about the journey, but the destination. And when they had arrived at the stable, they realized that something had changed – in their lives, and in the world.

And so we are now into the “post-Christmas” season of the Sundays after the Epiphany. The liturgical colours are once more green – perhaps to remind us that winter won’t last forever. The season of growth and renewal will begin again!

This will take us up to the start of Lent – when the promise of what took place in that stable will be fulfilled by the death and resurrection of our Lord! But, meanwhile, the ways will continue to be deep, and the weather sharp (we’re not past the snow yet!)

III

This time of year has a special significance to me. It was at a service at Saint George’s Round Church, during the Epiphany season, that I first realized my call to ministry. I think that perhaps I had been called previously, when I was much younger, but I had somehow managed to avoid it – life got in the way!.

But suddenly, in the middle of Holy Communion, in that sacred spot – there it was, and I knew it. And that was the start of the journey that has brought me here.

So, what better time to start the next stage of that journey?

This week, Isaiah prophesies that, “in the latter time, he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.” Here, on the coast of Nova Scotia, we are familiar with “the way of the sea.”

Isaiah’s reading last week began with, “Listen to me, O coastlands!” This struck me as being very appropriate to our location, here on the edge of Saint Margaret’s Bay.

I can remember coming here occasionally as a child, with my grandfather, who came out here on business. The drive out here was fascinating for a little child, sitting up front of his van – a long winding road, with new sights around every corner! Peggy’s Cove was as beautiful then as it is now – and before there were quite so many tour buses! I loved hearing his story about “Peggy of the Cove” the girl who was the only one who survived a long time ago shipwreck. We would stand there on the rocks – not **too** close to the water (!) – and witness the awesome beauty and power of the ocean.

Living on the Atlantic Coast, here in Nova Scotia, involves living “in the way of the sea”. We have all seen and felt its power; a manifestation of the power of God and His creation. The land has been sculpted by the glaciers and crashing waves for thousands of years, and we and our communities have been shaped by both land and sea.

When I met with our Wardens earlier this month, I was given the grand tour of all three churches. There are some lovely carvings and stained glass windows. You have three unique and beautiful buildings, and I can tell that they have been well taken care of!

I was taken with the William DeGarthe murals at Saint John’s. On the left side – the four fishermen, in an open boat on a rough sea. And on the right – Christ, walking out towards them, calming the waters.

What an image, for a church built where the land meets the sea!

This year, our parish will be celebrating 150 years of sheltering souls from the storms of life. I was told that St Peter’s Church was built by local shipbuilders; and that if you turned it upside down it would be a boat! Perfect imagery for setting forth on new ministry. I hope together we will be able to fish for people, and bring many more souls into this beautiful church.

Coastlands are fascinating places, not just because of their unique shape and character. They are a place of beginnings and endings; where land and sea both start and finish. If we stand where the land meets the sea, we look out to where the sea meets the sky, and – perhaps, on a good day – heaven meets the earth.

IV

Three summers ago, I went on a pilgrimage to the Scottish Island of Iona. It was the traditional burial ground for the Kings of Scotland, and is seen as a holy place.

The legend has it that in the Dark Ages, Saint Columba boarded his boat in Ireland, placed his trust in God, and went forth onto the waters. The Holy Spirit guided him and his followers across the Irish Sea, to the shores of Iona. He established the Abbey there, as the first step in his mission to bring the rest of the British Isles back to Christ.

The Reverend George MacLeod, (the Church of Scotland minister who founded the modern faith community on Iona), described the island as, “a thin place, between earth and heaven.” I would have to agree. The atmosphere there, among the ancient ruins and stone crosses, can only be

described as holy. I would go to the Abbey, at twilight to pray, and could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit. I felt truly blessed to have been able to make that pilgrimage.

It is interesting how such places – remote islands, mountain tops and wilderness areas – can be where we most feel God’s presence. When we encounter God in these “thin places,” he calls us to go back to our communities with the good news of what we have seen.

And, as today’s Psalm says, “...in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe in his shelter; he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling and set me high upon a rock.” Living on a rocky coast, we know the advantage of being sheltered “high upon a rock” – beyond the reach of the waves!

Perhaps our rocky and rugged coast is another “thin place” – land, sea and sky, heaven and earth, coming together. I feel the Presence in this sanctuary, just as I did at Saint George’s.

V

The names of the Churches here resonated with me, including our former church in West Dover.

I realized that they were named for Peter, Andrew, John and James – all fishermen, who followed Christ’s command to “fish for people”! This brings me back to today’s Gospel.

Remember that two weeks ago, we celebrated Jesus’ baptism. Today’s Gospel continues the story of the baptized Jesus, going forth to begin to preach the Good News of his Kingdom.

Last week’s Gospel described how Andrew and Simon Peter – the first of Christ’s disciples – started out as disciples of John the Baptist! This week, we fast-forward. John the Baptist has been arrested. And Jesus has “left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.”

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles” – this is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy!

“He will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.”

So here, living along a road by the sea, we can feel ourselves in good company. A thin place.

In last week’s Gospel, Peter and Andrew met Christ, and hung out with him for a bit. He invited them to “come and see”. Today, they meet him again, and this time he says “Follow me”. And so, they do. They get up and they follow Jesus. And the rest, as they say, is history!

And that is what we are all called to do.

Fast forward again. Remember that, by the time Paul was writing to the people of Corinth, the Good News had spread far and wide, and Christ's fellowship was being offered to Jews and Gentiles alike.

But despite this new unity, Paul was clearly coping with some issues. Our Epistle reads that "there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.'"

He asks: "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

No. We are **all** baptized in the name of Christ. We are **all** members of his "One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church." Jew and Gentile. Man and woman.

VI

But to follow Christ, especially across into the deep waters, we need to have faith that he is with us. He is that lighthouse on the rock, lighting our way, and warning us of danger.

Our faith requires us to trust and to love. We must trust God to guide us at those points when we leave the security of the land, and set out for new destinations. We must love those whom we find on our journey. By the grace of God, my journey has brought me here, and I look forward to sharing all of Christ's blessings with you in the time to come.

In closing, let us all pray, in the words of our Psalm: "Hide not your face from me, nor turn away your servant in displeasure. You have been my helper; cast me not away; do not forsake me, O God of my salvation."

Amen.