

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Easter 3-C (1 May 2022)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 9:1-20, Revelation 5:11-14, John 21:1-19, Psalm 30

I. Hearing a Calling

There's a common Christian convention to talk about a "calling." This is a phenomenon where someone hears God's voice – whether audibly or not – and shapes their life around what they hear. Some people are better listeners than others. I am one of the others. Not such a good listener.

It was a campus minister at Virginia Tech who first suggested I consider vocational ministry. I was both excited by his comment and terrified by it. Ultimately I chose to be deaf to God's call: it seemed too scary, too different from what I'd expected. I took a job in management consulting instead. I did OK, but my heart was somewhere else. God continued to work patiently in me, and I refused to hear every step of the way!

That is why I love today's story. I may not be the only one who is slow to hear God's call.

II. Peter goes fishing

Jesus had appeared twice to the disciples in Jerusalem. The disciples made their way back to Galilee as Jesus instructed them. But now they were at loose ends. They could not see the future, they did not hear God's calling sufficiently well to move forward. So, as they sat around looking at each other, Peter finally said, "I'm going fishing." You can just see all the others jumping up, relieved that *someone* suggested *something*. That's what leaders are for! Fishing they knew. They could do that. It would be nice, a relief, even, to pick back up their old habits. These friends and former business partners went out fishing because it's what they knew best.

So the disciples continued to follow Peter. He had the best suggestions.

Except that this particular night they caught nothing.

The professionals, the brain-trust of Galilee, the old hands, completely flopped. The whole group of them had spent the whole night working and had not one little sardine to show for it. I can imagine them as the sun was coming up: exhausted, frustrated, perhaps even reflective or at least silent in their fatigue.

III. Peter's Calling

Then some joker on the shore tells them to cast their net on the other side. What I want to know is: Why did they do it? Why did they agree to throw their net in one more time? Was it the force of habit, because someone once told them to do the same thing a couple years before. In another lifetime, before Jesus had been murdered?

But they threw their nets in and were immediately overwhelmed by the catch. They couldn't even pull it into the boat, it was so heavy! Immediately, the disciple whom Jesus loved, the one that stands in for you or me in the Gospel of John, as we look back with the benefit of hindsight, that disciple recognizes what is happening. He told Peter, "It's the Lord!" It was an "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" [The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!] It was that kind of moment!

What did Peter do then? He jumped in the water. He completely abandoned the boat, the fish, his friends. There was only one thing on his mind and that was getting to Jesus. Nothing else mattered.

(The disciples, as it happened, continued following Peter, especially as he headed toward Jesus.)

What's great here to me is that the disciple who might be us, you and me, figured out it was Jesus by hindsight. After they caught all those fish he or she said, "Ooooooh. I've seen this before. This is the kind of thing that happens when Jesus is around!" They remembered previous experiences with Jesus and saw the similarity of this experience, and knew that meant Jesus must be near. These are the kinds of experiences we get from reading Scripture, from gathering as Church, and from doing God's work in the world.)

What's also great is Peter. Do you know what leadership is? It's Peter, who denied Jesus three times, caring about nothing else but being close to Jesus once more. Our baptismal covenant calls that "repenting and returning to the Lord." That's what Peter did, turning away from the night spent fishing, just as they finally had something in the nets, and returning to Jesus instead! Jesus receives Peter by feeding him, inviting him to rest and relax, and then by giving him opportunity to recant those three denials. And each time Peter recants, Jesus explains what it means for Peter to love Jesus: it is to feed Jesus' lambs. This is Peter's calling. It is to continue to lead the community that Jesus leaves behind, caring for all who would follow Jesus. Even when that means abandoning the boat and following Jesus across the waves, leaving the boat to follow.

IV. Conclusion: Anticipate the consequences (tie back to beginning)

You'll note this space we meet in is called a "nave": the roof is shaped like a boat. We're in this boat, sailing toward God, following Peter and others who were uncompromising in their attachment to Jesus. Even those who were deeply flawed or slow to understand.

God is calling to you and to me, but to hear God's calling takes faith. It requires courage. I don't always have that courage, and I am practiced at *not* hearing God's call. But I find God works anyway: things just take longer when I'm not actively cooperating. So I tend to see what God is doing in the rear-view mirror. You've heard the saying that hindsight is 20:20? Driving exclusively by looking in the rear-view isn't the safest or most efficient way forward. I guess that just shows you how powerful God is. God can use even that!

When I arrived at St. Thomas', you regaled me with stories of St. Thomas' glory days, when Father Immel was here and the church school was bursting with life. That was a beautiful season, and a confirmation that God could do wonderful things through St. Thomas'.

As we look around us, what is God up to now? What is God's call to St. Thomas' today? I need your help in listening: I'm kind of slow sometimes. But I'm getting pretty practiced at driving via the rear-view mirror. And what do I see in the rear-view of St. Thomas'?

When you leave here today after the dismissal, I invite you to pause at the doorway. Look up! What do you see? Holly Pointe Commons opened six years ago in 2016. Rowan spent \$145 million to house 1400 students just steps from our doors. Our section of Main Street seems to be becoming fraternity row, leading hundreds of students to walk to and fro' past our campus even today! Glassboro's downtown has completely changed its appearance in the last decade. There are more students enrolled at Rowan than there are residents of Glassboro, not to mention faculty, staff, and associated businesses moving to Glassboro and surrounding areas.

I may be hard of hearing, but I believe that God is here, doing God's thing in Glassboro. And since what's happening in Glassboro right now is all bound up with Rowan University, that leads me to ask, where is God at Rowan? What is God's calling to St. Thomas' as a neighbor to Rowan? Already St. Thomas' has benefited from the demographic bump Rowan has brought to Glassboro. What does it mean for us to respond in faith to the new thing God is doing in Glassboro? How can we be God's church today even more than we were in any golden age of the past?

That same question applies to you and me, too. How is God speaking into your life? Where is God already present? What new thing is God doing in you? What old thing is yielding pitiful results, just not proving effective even though it used to serve you well? What might you need to let go in order to open up space for God's newest project in you? God is present. God is calling. If you will let it, your tomorrow will be different than your yesterday. While there is always suffering involved in following Jesus, God's promise in the end is to turn our wailing into dancing and our sorrow into joy. We've seen this before: in overflowing Sunday Schools, in our own life successes, and in the stories of the Scriptures. That's how God works. That is God's fixed and firm intention not only for St. Thomas', but for the life of every believer. We begin by stepping out the door, opening our eyes, and asking, "Where do we see God today?"

Amen.