

Sunday, January 23, 2011
Third Sunday after Epiphany / Lectionary 3

Isaiah 9:1–4
Psalm 27:1, 4–9
1 Corinthians 1:10–18
Matthew 4:12–23
Year A

I.N.I.

The church is a beautiful thing when it works. It's beautiful when it opens its doors to people of all stripes and occupations, and through its best efforts, and sometimes despite its best efforts, it recognizes that it is Christ himself that has made us one.

Oh, it is a joy to behold when a church does not sweat the small stuff. It is a wonder and a delight when a church does not live in the past, does not resemble a members-only club, that does not construct scenery that looks like a Christian community but behind the flimsy walls the only thing that keeps people there is stubbornness, only a fighting spirit.

I want to say over and over, be who you are. Be who you are called to be. You have the light, let it shine.

Zebulun and Naphtali were the weaklings of the tribes of Israel. They were sucked up by foreign influences quicker than you could say "Jack Robinson." While the rest of Israel was hunkering down in its remembering Torah, Zebulun and Naphtali changed their allegiances. It was as if as soon as big bully Assyria said "hey you, who do you think you are?" Zebulun said "we're Assyrians, like you."

Isaiah says that God will shine the light on unlikely Zebulun and Naphtali. Isaiah says just when you think you are down and out, shackled in slavery, drowning in debt, not the place you used to be, think again. God will make you the gateway for glory.

Zebulun and Naphtali were hidden talent. They were standing on their heads, until they were recognized for who they were, chosen, and destined for something greater than they could ever imagine or desire, and set up right, and heading in the right direction.

I invite you be unabashed Christ followers. That doesn't mean you have all the answers. It doesn't mean you're better than anyone else. It doesn't mean that you have either an inferiority complex or a superiority complex. I just want you to recognize the tug of Christ at the core of who you are. I want you at the ready to say to the guy at the video store, the women waiting in line with you at Stop & Shop, the first-time worshiper here, "we love our church and we welcome you." "We'd like you to know about our connection to Christian Community Action, our relationship with a congregation in the Hill neighborhood, our Yale Divinity students, our love of communal song, our exciting Bible Study, our soup supper at the Judds, how much we

love children,” or something that is true for Bethesda and that is true for you. You are hidden talent.

Jesus recruited four fishermen to come with him and said that they would now be catching people rather than fish. Simon and Andrew, James, and John were the Zebulun and Naphtali of Jesus’ day, minding their own business, then told they would be the gateway for glory.

Here’s how it’s told in the indigenous language of the Hawaiian people, in the language of Hawaiian Pidgeon, from the New Testament translation called *Da Jesus Book*:

One time Jesus walking by Galilee Lake, an he spock two bruddas, Simon da guy dey call Peter, an Andrew his brudda. Dey stay throwing net inside da water, cuz dey fisha guys. He tell um, “Eh, you guys! Go wit me! Da way you guy bring in da fish, I goin teach you guys how fo bring in peopo too! Right den and dea, dey jus wen leave da nets, an go wit him.

Going from dea, he spock two odda bruddas, James an his brudda John. Zebedee, dea fadda. Dey inside da boat wit dea fadda, fixing da nets. Jesus tell um fo come. Dey go way from da boat an dea fadda, an go wit him right den and dea.

Jesus is the beaming light. He preaches this new thing that God is doing. He demonstrates this new thing that God is doing, this good thing, this healing thing, this thing that goes to where it is dark and upside down and illuminates and sets up right.

Four unsuspecting Galileans get caught up in the Jesus movement. Later Paul reminds a confused congregation that it isn’t about him, or about Apollos or Cephas. Dear Chloe calls Paul for help, and Paul has to say to the people of Corinth over and over: Be who you are. You have the light let it shine. This is not a Paul Club. This is not a Bethesda Club. It’s movement, a community, a new thing that is about a God who goes to the darkest places to find light. It’s about the foolishness of a God who is known by a cross, and by those who claim that the cross means something about loving and saving and living.

Bethesda Lutheran Church is a place for Christ’s light to shine. We are stronger when we are together. We are more beautiful and eloquent than we can desire or imagine, when we get out of the way of excuses or complaining or wishful thinking, and bear one another’s burdens. Eagerly receive the gospel. Willingly engage in something that stretches us for a meaningful purpose. Joyfully meet someone new.

Annie Lamott is a hilarious writer who is unabashedly Christian, while admittedly wacky. She speaks about her son Sam as protesting when it’s time to go to church, but she makes him anyway. Why? Let her answer:

I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds.

But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community,

who pray, or practice their faith...people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their town candle; they are part of something beautiful. I saw something once from the Jewish Theological Seminary that said, "A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be part of a great meaning." Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.

*When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of **home**—that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, "You come back now."*

*--from *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor Books © 1999), p 100*

The church is a beautiful thing when it works. It's beautiful when it opens its doors to people of all stripes and occupations, and through its best efforts, and sometimes despite its best efforts, it recognizes that it is Christ himself that has made us one. How about it, Zebulun, Naphtali, Corinthians, Bethesda?

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