

EPIPHANY THREE, YEAR B, JANUARY 24, 2021

I remember when my niece was a teenager and my sister asked her to set the table. I was there for a family celebration and my niece ignored her mother as if she hadn't heard her. Not once but at least three times. I finally asked her why she wasn't answering her mother and she replied, "She isn't mad enough yet." Eventually, my sister was mad enough so my niece got up and did as she was asked. How many of you have either experienced that or done that yourself and just ignored someone calling you.

This morning's lessons are all about calls. More specifically they are calls from God. Confronted with calls for action from God, we can find many excuses. "I didn't hear you!" "I don't understand what you want!" "It's too hard!" "Find someone else!" "You couldn't possibly mean me!" The real reason is more likely to be "I'm afraid."

Consider the story of Jonah. God called Jonah to action. He was to go to the people of Nineveh to give them a message from God. The behavior of the people of Nineveh was sinful and they needed to turn their lives around and get back on the right track. So God called Jonah to deliver this message. However, Jonah couldn't believe God was asking this of him as the Ninevites were Israel's ruthless hated enemies who had terrorized them. No way did he want to go so he refused to go. Like my niece with her mother he heard what God was saying to him but he ignored the message. God went to great lengths to move him to action. When he finally got around to delivering the message, he marched into the city preached a 7 word sermon and stormed back out as if to say, alright, I did it now leave me alone! Then to his great astonishment, the people responded. They immediately proclaimed a fast, and everyone put on sackcloth and repented. And Jonah was absolutely furious that God had spared his enemies. Absolutely. Furious.

The point of the story is that Jonah was reluctant to act because he was afraid of what God could do outside of what Jonah wanted God to do. Isn't that true how we perceive God. That God has to be on my side! I'm always amused when we pray for a specific sports team to win as if God is going to take sides. Unfortunately, that's where we are as a country too. Each side believes God is on their side. Well, guess what. God does not take sides. Our God is one who defies our expectations and descriptions. The story of Jonah epitomizes the reluctance and the fear we exhibit in responding to God's call because we're afraid our image and understanding of who God is is going to be turned upside down. Jonah was furious with God. Why? Because God surprised Jonah with a new revelation of who God is. God is not transactional. God is not obsessed with right or wrong, guilt and punishment, success and rewards. Rather God is obsessed with loving us just as we are because God is relentlessly relational. We have a God who forgives. A God who offers new life. A God who forgets the past and walks with us into the future. And here is a God who does this with our enemy so turns everything we believe about God upside down.

Now in the Gospel we hear about the call of some of the disciples. Jesus goes to Galilee preaching a message very much like his predecessor, John the Baptist. It is a call to repentance. Yet it is a call far more than simply asking for and receiving forgiveness. It is a call to renewed faith and radical change. It's a call to discover a God that surprises you – a god of grace and forgiveness.

In fact that is our call to find the mission to which God has called us, and to take it seriously. Jesus offers us that mission. He proclaims, "The kingdom of God has come near." The kingdom with all its spiritual blessings and possibilities is here, now, in this place, at this very time. Turn back to God. Repent. Accept the Good news. Have faith.

This is our call to action. We need to understand that we are called to believe with eyes of faith that we are to link our lives with the purpose of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We know that we are called to any number of vocations, electricians, laborers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, accountants, homemakers and even retirees .

No matter what our worldly vocation is, the one thing we are all invited to share in is the redemptive dream of God for this world of ours. We are called to follow, to love, to forgive, to witness, to serve, and above all to hope, to hope that our offering of these things will make a difference.

We still have any number of excuses for ignoring God's call. I'm too old or too busy. That person is more talented or more capable than me. And the biggest excuse we have is, it won't make a difference.

That is the most difficult thing to overcome. When we think that way it is very easy to convince ourselves that there is no point. But we must trust that we are part of the solution. We must trust that God's plan of love and compassion will ultimately prevail. We must trust that God will enable us to accomplish this calling.

When I was in the Diocese of North Carolina and Bishop Curry was the bishop of the diocese he made these remarks in his 2012 convention address, "We are here to do more than just consume oxygen. We are here, as the Jewish tradition teaches, to heal and repair the creation. We are here to love the God who created us and to love and care for each other as children of the one God, as the human family of God. We are here to transform what often is a nightmare of sin and death, hatred and violence, animosity and bigotry into something more closely resembling God's dream of a renewed and transformed human family and creation. I believe that our hope as the human family depends on our getting that right.

He said, "I didn't figure that out on my own. It's not my message. That's the message of Jesus. That's the Gospel. Bishop Curry concluded his address by saying, "And yet, there is something rich and strong and good and holy within this Church. ...We already have what is needed. A God to commend. A loving and liberating Lord to follow. A Gospel that is good news to proclaim. A way of being Christian that is faithful and orthodox, loving and compassionate, open and generous. A way of following Jesus that is radically welcoming toward all and unafraid to proclaim, as the saying goes, that "God loves you, no exceptions!" A Church witnessing to these extraordinary truths has a message for this moment. This is the truth for the 21st century. This is a voice for these times

We are called to rid ourselves from the cycle of judgement and condemnation. God chooses to love even when we rush to judgement. Jesus showed us so many times how to set aside judgement and to embrace compassion. Jesus showed us time and time again, it is by serving that we can get a taste of what another person might be going through as a step forward. Lady Gaga wrote a song a few years ago with these lyrics: Till it happens to you, you don't know how I feel. Till it happens to you You won't know, it won't be real. It's true we can never truly know the experience of another person. But in order to faithfully follow a relentlessly relational god we need to find ways to feel and show

compassion to people whose experience is not our own or who we understand. Compassion is when we set aside judgement and focus more on looking for our common ground.

This is God's call to each of us to expand our compassion, empathy and love. So we have a choice. We can hear God's call and either accept it or reject it. But ask yourselves, what would the world look like if we all accepted this call?

This past week a young poet recited her poem at the inauguration and the last three lines of her poem perfectly sums up this message of call and hope and also epitomizes what the season of Epiphany is all about. She said,

“For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.

If only we're brave enough to be it.

Are we brave enough to be it - the person God calls us to be? Amen.