

Isaiah 9:1-4
Matthew 4:12-23

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church on January 27, 2008

Ronald Reagan once said that he learned a great lesson in decision making when he was a boy shopping for shoes with his mother. Little Ronnie couldn't decide, he couldn't commit to one pair of shoes over another. The round toed or the square toed shoes.

So, his mother, having waited long enough, bought him both pair. Now, one would think his mother was taking the easy way out and Ronnie had it made in the shade with all that he wanted. Well, his mother had him wear one of each kind of shoe, so obviously the shoes never matched and a lasting impression was made on little Ronnie. It's better to make a decision than not too. An important truth for a boy who would become our nation's president.

Experience teaches us that there is an obvious cost with every decision we make. The Subway franchise has caught on to this in their recent commercials. You may have seen the one where the woman steps up to a fast-food burger restaurant and asks, "What comes with such and such burger combo." The young man behind the counter says, "Well ma'am, it comes with a slight dose of regret, a hint of guilt, flabby arms, your clothes will feel tighter, and an overall feeling of 'blah'."

From the minute we get up in the morning to the moment our heads hit the pillow at night, we are bombarded with decisions to make.

There's a plethora of scientific data explaining how we make decisions in various circumstances from the Myers-Briggs inventory, on down to personal biases, to the moral and ethical factors involved.

Yet, all things considered regarding what goes into making a decision the actions of the first disciples in our gospel reading seem ridiculous. Illogical. And downright insulting to our intelligence.

The gospel of John tells us that Peter and Andrew had already been indirectly introduced to Jesus when as followers of John the Baptist, John pointed at Jesus saying, "Look, the lamb of God!"

John the Baptist has been arrested, Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee, a gentle breeze coming in off the water. We don't know if there was a breeze, but It's always interesting to fill in the details of a gospel story, to bring 'life' to the words, similar to an artist painting his/her vision of what occurred.

He sees Peter and Andrew fishing in the distance, dragging fish in with their nets. Fishermen at that time were the lowest on the professional totem pole, regarded as uneducated, brutish, and regarded as 'nobodies'.

And at this specific moment in time, in an odd setting, and with unlikely and unsuspecting people, the Son of God begins his ministry...with an invitation.

“Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

It is in this one sentence, that we see that the good news begins in the heart of God as God shows forth a determination to have a family. God does not leave the world to its own devices, letting things happen as they will. Even when tragedies occur it's natural to ask, “Where was God in all this?” All of the scriptures are a long story of God's refusal to leave us to ourselves.

Some would claim that this story is Jesus' first miracle. In speaking one sentence, two men immediately follow. We don't know how much time passed or what they were thinking...other than that they followed. Eventually, two more men follow...brothers who leave their father in the boat.

Against such rational and educated standards, the folks back then and even those of us today when hearing these historical words, could ask relative to the disciples, “What were they thinking?” Throwing caution to the wind, taking a risk, not waiting until tomorrow to think it over, making a seemingly drastic decision.

What is inspiring about these early followers of Christ is their deep commitment, their uninhibited movement, their openness to the invitation.

Here, today, in this place...how practical is this? Another ‘feel good’ Sunday morning story from the gospels.

As this is heard by teenagers struggling to be ‘cool’ and in the ‘in crowd’ at school...following Jesus to go sit by that loner in the cafeteria is not an easy task; employees who feel that their faith has little, if any, value at work; parents who are realizing they don't have all the answers to their children's basic faith questions and find it frustrating to pass on the faith; senior citizens who's faith is challenged by health concerns...some not even able to read the scriptures anymore.

Following Jesus...isn't as easy as it sounds.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian martyr, wrote in his book the Cost of Discipleship, “the subsequent obedience to Christ's call is ‘offensive to natural reason.’”

When I spoke recently at a gathering of our congregation's Friendship Group, a group of senior citizens here at church, I talked about the important role that grandparent's in the faith development of their grandchildren. In this element of sharing our faith, I asked them what first came to mind when they heard the word ‘evangelism’.

A gentleman raised his hand and said, “A pushy person knocking on my door.”

Evangelism, sharing the good news of the gospel carries with it various stereotypes based on negative experiences of our own, those whom we know, and scandals from those preaching on television. Bill Hybels, pastor at Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, once wrote that a gentleman was adamant on never being a part of an evangelism ministry at the church. When Bill asked why, the man answered.

“I would never want to inflict the burden of God on anyone.”

It's safer to keep our faith to ourselves since either we're not comfortable with our own faith life, not confident in talking about the goodness of God, or simply don't want to be lumped into that 'pushy evangelist-type' group...those who think they're better than others, intolerant, never listening to those their talking to, telling others how bad they really are.

Mindful of shrinking memberships throughout congregations and losing nearly an entire generation of youth, Paul Harvey once said, "We have drifted away from being fishers of men to being keepers of the aquarium."

The good news of good is an 'external word', always coming in from the outside.

It is that 'external word'...the word that God invaded our world with love, acceptance, grace, and compassion...is the light, as Isaiah said, it is the light that shines into our darkness. That God would invade our lives, to invade your life, in a quest of his Son taking on your sin, dying and rising to new life, giving you forgiveness, a new beginning, and unending joy at his promises...now, 'that is offensive to natural reason'.

It is a message that has been in conflict with every culture in which it has found itself, including the first culture it encountered. More often than not...when we think of evangelism...we think of how bad we are rather than how good God is.

George Whitefield was 24 when he began preaching in Philadelphia back in 1739. His open-air preaching led to crowds of 20,000 and in 73 days he traveled 800 miles and preached 130 sermons.

Martin Luther King, Jr. moved a nation to goodness and equality...saying that one day he would get to the mountain of glory before those who were listening. Thousands flocked to hear the good news of hope, determination, and God's forgiveness and love.

Billy Graham began evangelizing in Illinois and preached throughout the world. Preaching that we are all sinners...but, in holding the Bible, stating the God's salvation is in Jesus Christ. The loving acceptance of Christ was marked by those gathered, coming forward with broken hearts, guilty conscience, and a quest seeking a new beginning...singing the song, "Just as I am."

As we gather for our annual meeting this morning, it is with great joy to reflect on our shared ministry here at Trinity. Our children's ministry and preschool is vibrant, our youth ministry is making positive steps forward and seeking to make positive changes, an adult education opportunity is on the horizon, people are continually supporting our shared ministry in our community-such as the Community Table/Beacon House, in Jamaica; in Darfur, Sudan; and financial giving to all our ministries. And today we look forward to 2008 and vote on a new pastor joining our shared ministry.

There are many reasons to be thankful for people deciding to answer God's call "to share in Christ's love and share the good news."

In the upcoming week, I encourage you to be attentive to situations that the Lord places you in, the conversations you have...where you can share the good news of Christ. By simply talking to the person no one wants to be around, striking up a little chat with the person at the checkout counter, or listening to the frustrations of a friend.

Nothing drastic, nothing imposing, just inviting others into the goodness of God.

Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, when your Son's feet graced the sandy shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, such was the time when he called out for others to follow him. That calling, and the challenges it involves, has transcended the ages and we gather here to seek your guidance, to be comforted by your words of forgiveness, and to be strengthened by the power of your word.

Bless each of us in our journey of faith and our shared ministry together. Keep us safe this upcoming week and may we be confident in sharing our faith in what we say and do.

In Christ's name we pray...and all God's disciples said, 'Amen'.