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Epiphany 3 Series A 2017

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Third Sunday after Epiphany, Jan 22

I really like preaching in the season of Epiphany. It strikes at the very heart and core of the reason we are here, the purpose of the Church, the very nature of our existence as the Body of Christ. Its strong themes of mission and outreach are tied intricately with the nature of Christ. The deeds and the theology are so close that the connections between them are easy to make. Often we find the deep theology is addressed in isolation from the embodiment of that theology in our lives. Or, more problematically, the living of life is addressed in a theological vacuum and our default human position of self-sufficiency and power takes over. We end up become our own gods and we succumb to the Eden temptation all over again.

Epiphany won't let us do that. The revelation of Christ and the opening of his heart to the suffering of the world as its Savior are just too closely intertwined. He calls disciples and makes them fishers of men. He has compassion and draws all people to himself.

Today we begin the ministry of Jesus, in Galilee of the Gentiles. Disciples are called and they leave their physical nets to take up the net of words which gathers men. Those nets gather up all sorts of people, including a few stinkers along the way. Paul will help us see what we do in that situation a little better, or perhaps better, what Christ does in that situation.

The psalmist is perhaps the place where you want to pay your attention today. He sings of his confident faith in his Savior God. If there is a place you want your people to be when they walk out the doors, David's confident hope is perhaps the best place. Such people will be the evangelists, the servants, the embodiment of Christ, and the kingdom people of God in this place.

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look on our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever

Mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of "majesty"!? What is the hand of majesty? That rather sounds like some superpower which a Marvel Comics character might have. Is it the power of God that makes the demons and diseases flee before Jesus? Is it the ineffably sublime nature of God? Not sure we have got there yet. Do we experience this "hand" in the creation event, the stunning view of mountains or the sea which takes our breath away to see it? Do we do better to see the hand of God's majesty in the person of Jesus himself? Is that God's majesty extended (revealed)? What is the hand of God's majesty for which we pray and which will heal and defend us?

Might we perhaps see the hand of God's majesty in the hand we have raised in benediction? Do we with this just make it too familiar? Is the hand of God's majesty something that should awe us? Is this like a king/queen who stretches forth his/her hand to do something good? The mighty

hand of God shelters the children of Israel. “The strong arm and mighty hand of God” is the traditional formula to describe God’s redemptive act in the Exodus, throughout the OT. Is this the mother hen stretching out her wings to which Jesus refers in Luke? The perfect king looks out for his people, cares for his subjects. How does the gospel text show up here? Jesus summons disciples to his service.

The prayer is otherwise pretty straight forward. God has all the power and he does not wear out. He never grows weary and, unlike even the hardest of granite, he never erodes away. He is everlasting. I believe there are several brands of things like boot soles which advertise themselves as everlast(ing) which might make an interesting comparison.

We pray that God would mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth his hand. This is another straightforward line, but again might need to be expanded upon. I do believe that one of the great temptations of the evil one for our age is the temptation of self-sufficiency. Thanks to narcotics and antibiotics, most of us are not terrified of disease, perhaps cancer or heart disease, but even there, as we look about our fellow congregants, we might be deceived into thinking that here is a fellow who survived cancer, here is a woman who has managed her heart disease, etc. The specter of being utterly helpless and weak is often hidden behind the nursing home walls which many of our parishioners never enter. Do we say that infirmities = internal, mental/psychological infirmities or do we suggest that there are other infirmities, infirmities of spirit and soul, morals and heart? How does the faith relationship with Christ help me face my own weakness? My world might collapse – but faith helps me deal with that. Is there a spiritual component here? Do we face a real and personal enemy who works on this weakness, bringing us into depression, despair, etc. Many folks also face a physical weakness which opens a door for that evil to work.

Of course infirmities might also refer to our utter weakness and helplessness before sin, before addiction, before our ruined relationships, before just about anything. The preacher will want to ask himself just what is the nature of the infirmity as his people experience it? Remember, sermons are never about other people, but it starts with the preacher himself and then the folks who will hear it with their own two ears. My sermon needs to be about these people to whom I am speaking. Why does their situation, my situation, require God’s majestic hand, offered in mercy, to heal and defend?

Readings

Isaiah 9:1-4

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;

those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.
³ You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

⁴ For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

⁵ *For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.*

⁶ *For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷ *Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

The last four verses here are not actually in the pericope for this day, but they are so much a part of this text that I thought we ought to at least look at them.

For the first Christians, for the writers of the Gospels and for Paul too, the idea that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy was a very significant piece. I am not sure we really appreciate that. We also don't understand the almost polemical nature to those statements in the first century. The Jewish Christians who wrote the NT were engaged in a difficult struggle with their former co-religionists in standard Judaism. For the first several decades they perceived one another suspiciously but as though there were all still part of the same stream.

The Gospels, especially Matthew, seem to come out of that moment in history when the two traditions, Christianity and Judaism, were making a definitive split. What the NT authors are doing is putting forward a radical re-reading of the Old Testament. They are truly reading it

very differently than their Jewish counterparts. This can even be seen in the re-ordering of the OT books. The Christian order which has the OT ending with the prophets and their clear vision of a Messiah leaves the OT looking for the Savior. Just read the last chapter of Malachi who predicts the coming of John the Baptist to see what I mean.

The traditional ordering of the OT, or TaNaK as they call it, in Judaism has the OT ending with the writings, Psalms, Ezra, Nehemiah, I and II Chronicles and their appeal to the community to re-engage with worship and Jewish identity. The OT for them ends with books that focus not on the prophetic vision of a Messiah, but on the community of Jews. This will serve to bury the prophetic witness in the middle of their book and to change the subject as they come to the end. They will perceive that the suffering servant of Isaiah is not found in a single individual, but in the aggregate community of believers.

In one sense, they will be right, for we would heartily concur with them that the community which is the Church, the body of Christ does in fact fulfill many of these prophecies. Their contention is, however, that the community is the final fulfillment of the prophecy. Christians like Matthew, Paul, and other NT writers will assert that the community is the result of the Messiah, it is not the messiah. The NT authors, by adhering to the Septuagint's ordering of the OT, which had been done in Egypt about two hundred years before Jesus will radically re-read these prophecies like Isaiah's. The result will be the logger-head between Christians and Jews of the first century and the 21st century.

What does this mean? For the interpreter of these texts in a Christian context, the most important referent for understanding Isaiah is often not the clear or obvious sense of the text at first blush, but what the NT says about it. They will be quite creative sometimes. Matthew will pick up these very words and understand them to be a direct reference to Christ, who ministered in the area which had once been inhabited by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee.

So the very location of Jesus' ministry becomes a matter of the Gospel here. Jesus has come to this place. God foresaw this and moved the prophet Isaiah to speak these words. Of course, how much of this did Isaiah know? We haven't a clue. For him this land had been ravaged by the Assyrians and was most likely a paragon of empty desolation. It was the very picture of hell and despair. It was a raw wound on the very covenant promise God had made with Abraham to give him the land. As such it was a constant reminder of the nation's failure to keep the covenant. It had once been a fertile land filled with God's people, now it was de-populated or worse, re-populated with the unbelievers and the theological half-breeds who would become the Samaritans.

Isaiah is probably suggesting that God can restore even such a desolate place. In a message much like Ezekiel's valley of the Dry Bones in Ez 37.

Yet, when Matthew tells the story, the Galilee is filled with pious Jewish folk. It is once more the happy home of faithful sons and daughters of Abraham. I am sure that as the settlements of the

Galilee started to take over the land from the gentiles, they appealed to these very words from Isaiah to justify their settlements, just as Jewish settlers in Palestine do today. They understood that Isaiah saw a time when this land would be filled with God's people again. Would Isaiah have concurred?

Yet the NT writers will strongly re-read this. This is not about the community first, it is about the work of the Messiah first as he re-creates the community that will look like him. Any Christian interpreter has to wrestle a little with this. Luke 24:45 seems to be a key here which demands our faith or this will be a stumbling block for us.

Thus, it seems, we can hardly preach the Isaiah 9 text without Matthew's help.

Psalm 27:1-9

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

² When evildoers assail me
to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes,
it is they who stumble and fall.

³ Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.

⁴ One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will lift me high upon a rock.

⁶ And now my head shall be lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent

sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸ You have said, "Seek my face."
My heart says to you,
"Your face, LORD, do I seek."

⁹ Hide not your face from me.
Turn not your servant away in anger,
O you who have been my help.
Cast me not off; forsake me not,
O God of my salvation!

¹⁰ *For my father and my mother have forsaken me,
but the LORD will take me in.*

¹¹ *Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.*

¹² *Give me not up to the will of my adversaries;
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they breathe out violence.*

¹³ *I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living!*

¹⁴ *Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!*

This passage is so filled with familiar and profound lines that it really deserves our attention. The confidence which the psalmist professes here is exactly where we want our parishioners to be after they hear the words of Isaiah and our Lord in Matthew. I have worked this into a sermon idea.

I Corinthians 1:10-18

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the

household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

Here may be another way to work on the infirmities which the collect mentions. A conflicted congregation can feel like a pretty helpless place. I have been in one of those, and I would bet that almost every Christian has. Often this is driven by shrinking finances and/or twisted individuals who see their membership in a church as an occasion to exercise power of some sort. The simple reality is that we cannot afford to do things like we once did, and we can be altogether too permissive of certain sorts of behavior. The result can be a congregation which is terribly conflicted.

But what is the solution to this? We will not find it in the wisdom of consultants or in the power of a really successful stewardship campaign. Peace is not found in the legalism of constitutions and bylaws. It is the potency, the wisdom of a cross, which will change all this. Alas, Jesus does not call us merely to watch the crucifixion, but to join him, to take up the cross, sacrifice all for him. The disciples were not told to eat their fill and then share the five loaves and two fish with the multitudes, but they gave all their loaves and all their fish and Jesus multiplied that paltry meal, not even enough for them, until it overflowed for all. Can we really argue about the lack of resources?

People who have heard Jesus' call will not have time to fight and they will not stint in their gifts. The world is dying without this Jesus and he has saved my whole life, how can I not be part of that rescue mission? I used to have some members who were part of the local search and rescue squad. They bought big 4X4 SUV's and trucks, painted them red, devoted hours to training, all so they might be ready to save a human life in need. They actively recruited new members and proudly joined their fellow rescue squad members in the annual Fourth of July parade. Don't get me wrong, this was a marvelous service and a good thing to do and I was proud to see members of my church engaged in this. But what does it say when we cannot get folks to commit like that to the ministry of a congregation? It is not that people don't commit to causes they believe in. What does it take to get folks to lead a project and put their all into it? What does it take for people to be so excited about the good they are doing that they quite naturally invite their family, their friends, their co-workers?

Paul was also talking about a rescue mission, a rescue which the world did not understand and called foolish but to anyone who has really found himself picked up from the sinful mire by the

loving hands of that Savior, it makes perfect sense what is happening. Indeed, what they experience there is nothing less than the very power of God for the salvation of the world.

Paul seems to suggest here that the cross of Christ renders all the things that divide us trivial. He died for that person who disagreed with you at the church meeting last week. Which is the larger issue, the death of God's son or the allocation of funds in the budget? Why then are you still angry at him or her? Why do you find it difficult to talk to that person? What should you do? What should he or she do as well?

Paul is contextualizing conflict here. It is strong Law in that it really points to our own sinful foolishness. But it is also strong Gospel in that the cross on which Christ died was for all the sins, including my sins. Paul is bringing this point up right here at the beginning of the book because he also has been hurt by this bunch of folks and he is applying it as much to himself as anyone. Jesus has not stopped collecting sinners at his feet, because he loves sinners, he died for them, and he has forgiven them. The preacher who has the charge of a divisive congregation will not get far screaming about how wrong division is. He will see serious headway made if he preaches the unifying love of Christ for every human being.

Paul urges a unity in mind and in the same judgment. The Greek word for mind "nous" is a really important word. We find it in Romans 12:2 as well, there it suggests that a Christian has a new way of thinking since his/her baptism. We are different thinkers, the ways of the world are no longer conforming us, but our minds have been renewed. Thus, I don't believe Paul is urging them all to agree with one another, but to be united in the new mind which is the gift of God. But what is this mind, this judgment?

Here I think we do well to turn to II Corinthians 5 where Paul asserts that he no longer thinks of people as enemies, even though once he thought of Christ that way. But now everyone is a new creation in Christ, everyone! Paul had no enemies as a result. There were people who worked against him, who even tried to kill him like Sosthenes, but Paul's new mind simply did not see him as an enemy.

We are united not in agreeing on doctrine, but in the mind of Christ, whose transformative love changed score keeping Saul of Tarsus into the missionary we know as Paul who embraced Sosthenes, someone whose personal story must have been very familiar to Paul. Paul is not appealing them to agree in their theology, but be united in Christ's mind of love. This is the discernment/judgment. Notice after he gives the example of the problematic factions, he asks if "Christ is divided."

So how does one preach this? I think the final verses are really important. The unity is not found in us agreeing with one another because we have struggled into some human unity. The unity to which Paul called them and calls us is a unity which is found in Christ's judgment, the work he accomplished on the cross. We proclaim Christ's judgment and mind – he has died for this person, this other, this "enemy" and makes all the difference in the world for how I will treat

them, speak about them, work with them, and all the rest of the stuff that goes into being a Christian together. If I treat them as if Christ has not died for them, as a real enemy, then I am also limiting Christ's love to myself. I think that is what Paul is talking about when speaks of Christ's cross emptied of power. The ridiculousness of the cross, the foolishness is in that very "unanimity" of its judgment. They are all sinners, I died for them all. Life has to be lived in that reality.

Matthew 4:12-25

¹² Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
on them a light has dawned."

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them.

²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

We learned last week that Jesus and Andrew and Peter had already spent some time together. John is now in prison, Jesus heads out and starts picking up his old disciples, the ones who spent that day with him in John 1. This reverses the idea from last week when Jesus asked them, "what are you seeking?" Now it is Jesus deliberately seeking out and finding the disciples of John and calling them to follow him. We thought this might have interesting application to today. Many folks are aware of church. They grew up in it, they are familiar with the Christmas and Easter story, but they are not there. Jesus knows them and Jesus is seeking them. Jesus is not just wandering the shores of Galilee stumbling on random fishermen. He has these guys in mind. He

has already spent time with them and has not forgotten them. He is looking for them. He is looking for us too and the folks out there too. He spent time with us in Sunday School and VBS and the events of our childhood. He got to know us. He has not forgotten and is seeking out people, even if they are lukewarm, not showing up, absent-mindedly tending their daily business, fishing.

It is really interesting to me that this whole scene may have taken place at night. Ancient fishermen cast these nets at night, since they did not have monofilament lines and the fish would have been spooked by a big dark net flying over the water above them. Of course, the other Gospels suggest that they were mending nets, which would have been a daytime activity, but if they are fishing as they cast these nets, they were most likely doing so at night.

I think this text actually has a very potent, almost crushing Law to speak to us today. The kingdom of God is about growth, gathering people, the masses of humanity flocking to Jesus. But our parishes are often struggling, small, and shrinking. Does this mean we are not the community of God? Does this mean we are not the kingdom of God? These questions cannot truly be avoided but it is much more comfortable for us to pretend they are not there.

Perhaps we need to see this in light of Isaiah. He spoke to his Israelite audience who were hammered at the time. He spoke hope to a very discouraged and downtrodden folks and offered them a hope of God's restoration. It would not be what they immediately thought was salvation. It would mean they would go into exile, and only a tiny remnant would return. Is this a call for us to remember that our institutional churches are not the kingdom of God, but his people are the kingdom of God? Jesus is working out there doing kingdom work. The sooner we realize that his Kingdom goals may not exactly coincide with our congregational goals, the better we can jump into what He is doing.

These words also serve as a great summary text for the season of Epiphany. You can find most of the themes in here.

- 1. Jesus preaches what sounds like the same message that John preached, but with substantive differences. He heals every disease and infirmity, he casts out the demons; he restores the broken creation. Now the Kingdom of heaven is not only close by, as John said, it is here, it is truly at hand, it is Jesus' hand. (See the discussion of the "hand of majesty" under the collect for the day)*
- 2. Jesus miraculously heals. This is a potent demonstration of his divine nature. Notice the emphasis in verse 23 that he heals every affliction, every disease.*
- 3. Jesus gathers the peoples, not just the Jews but from beyond the confines of Palestine, the Decapolis and Syria beyond the Jordan, but Jews too, from Jerusalem and Judea and Galilee. In prophet terms, this is a divine sort of action. God is a gatherer of people. He is an enormously attractive force. Do we miss this sometimes when we talk to the consultants who have all these plans for how we will make our church grow? I*

am all for following Jesus, but marketing strategies and ministry seem at cross purposes sometimes. It is God who attracts, who calls, gathers, and enlightens folks, not me. He does it through me. And he does it according to his plan and schedule, not mine. Our discouragement is often rooted in the fact that we expect what we do to work, we believe that we have done all the right things and that means God should deliver new members, growth, etc. But that is putting me in the driver's seat when that spot belongs to God. I am called to a faithfulness and the burden of success ultimately rests with him. That can be a mealy-mouthed excuse for my laziness too, but it also can be a necessary truth. You can do it right and it might not still work.

4. *Jesus also gathers disciples. If you paid attention to last week's gospel, in John, where the disciples first meet Jesus at the suggestion of John the Baptist, you know that this is not the first time that Jesus has encountered these four men who are fishing by the sea. It seems that Jesus deliberately seeks out John's old disciples and calls them after John's arrest. We often make much of the fact that these men left their nets and followed Jesus, but it is also healthy to notice that he had cultivated this relationship for some time before they were asked to make this sacrifice. Are we too easily satisfied with a profession of faith and do not press forward to call for disciples.*
5. *Jesus fulfills prophecy. This will particularly important in Matthew's account; although, all the Gospel writers understand him to be the fulfillment of prophecy and will say as much. For Matthew, however, this is a primary statement about Jesus. He is the one that the OT prophets were looking for. In fact, he is so adamant about it, we often wonder why the Jews of Jesus day and today just cannot see that. That is a whole other conversation, but let it suffice that their response is that he only partially fulfills the prophecy. To which the Christian in turn says, "But, he comes again." And so we both are in the position of waiting for the Messiah.*

What is one to preach in all this? I caution the preacher to choose one and remember that this Epiphany season and its themes will roll around again and again. You don't need to preach it all this time. You will have next year, and if you don't have next year we will all be in heaven and it won't matter, so do one thing really well right now.

Law

1. This is a benighted world. That darkness touches our own lives and it touches the life of every human being. So much of what is wrong with us has no real solution. The politicians running for office would like us to believe that they can fix some of these problems, but in truth they are just as powerless before them. We are a people without hope of ourselves. Perhaps there is a beautiful place where relationships are healthy and strong, families all love one another, churches are growing, sickness does not happen, schools are all good, there is no hunger, etc. It is the world of which I might

catch a glimpse on some television show, but I will never really know. My life belongs to the bottom half of the human race.

2. The benighted world seems to have shown up in spades at my congregation. We don't have enough money, we are fighting with each other, and we do that well, or at least with a disturbing relish. We have mastered the art of taking care of ourselves, and the world dies outside our doors, but we don't seem to notice. Our church budget is tight, we are not growing. It seems the kingdom which Jesus preached is not here.
3. God comes with great demands upon me. I am afraid to leave my nets and follow Jesus. How will I keep up on my mortgage? How will I make my car payment? How will I explain this to my family and friends and co-workers if I really engage in the radical life of service to which he calls me? How will I explain it to myself?
4. I know I am unworthy to be called a servant of God. My own indecision in all this seems like an indictment. I know the skeletons that lurk in my own spiritual closet, the things of which I am ashamed and perhaps I have never admitted to anyone, even my own spouse. How can Jesus know all and want me? I am not OK. I see people doing amazing things and realize that I am not able to do that. I don't have the insight, the prayer life, the strength. Perhaps I am destined to be one of those anonymous sorts of Christians who just prays (not enough) and pays (probably even less.) Is that a copout, a justification for my own inactivity? Yes, it is. It is my fear and not my faith speaking.
5. The problems just seem so large. Who can actually do anything about them? I cannot even get my own life in order, let alone stand up to the issues that confront my neighborhood and my own family or church. When you look out to the larger issues which confront humanity I am ready to give up. This is just too much.

Gospel

1. The Savior has come to rescue broken and dying people. The purpose of the incarnation was not to skim the top off the human race but to delve all the way to the bottom, to the weakest and most broken among us. No one is beneath the love of God. The sick and the demoniacs, the blind and the lame are healed by Jesus.
2. The cross of Christ, foolishness to some, a stumbling block to others, is incredibly attractive to people and it makes disparate people one. My congregation is not united in its likes and dislikes, its homogeneity of socio-economic status or racial make-up. It is one at an altar where each is united in the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. That is true for anyone who kneels at this rail.
3. This rescue mission is both a worthy thing to do and incredibly attractive. It continues to summon real people to make great sacrifices around the world to help the helpless

and to share the Gospel light with people in darkness. Examples abound, many right in your own congregation, perhaps even in your own life. Use them!

4. Jesus is patient with us. The expectation is not that we have some sudden epiphany moment, but like disciples who were introduced to Jesus, who spent a day with him, who knew his voice already, we may find ourselves busy about the good things of life, tending our nets, scrubbing the barnacles off our boats, when a voice summons us to a new and different walk with Jesus. This is about a lifetime of relationship. Perhaps today is a preparing day, perhaps today is a calling day, in any event, it is a day when Jesus works toward your fullest participation in His kingdom as a joyful, willing member of his rescue team.
5. Jesus does not call the perfect people to himself, but his empowering Good News means that even profoundly broken people are called to participate. Paul was a great persecutor of the Church, Sosthenes had tried to have Paul killed, now they are united in the common goal of bringing peace to the warring factions of Corinth. God cares about the relationships of this congregation and he has shed his blood for every sin we have committed against one another. There is no hurt now so large that we cannot kneel at this rail in the love of Christ together. The mission, the healing, the love of God has within it the ability to overwhelm every negative thing you can say or see about you or me.

Sermon Themes:

1. [Jesus Goes Looking for His Disciples \(That the Holy Spirit would empower and call the hearer to invite an inactive member back to church.\)](#)

[This sermon builds on the fact that Jesus has spent time with Andrew and Peter before he calls them from their fishing boats. Last week we read that John had pointed Jesus out to Andrew and he had brought his brother Simon to Jesus. Things started so well, why are they out here fishing instead of following Jesus some more? Who knows how that happened.](#)

[Now John is in prison, it appears their days of discipleship are done. They are back in the boats, casting nets, about the daily business of life. But here comes Jesus. He knows them. He remembers them, he loves them, and has plans for them. He finds them smelling of fish and the sea, and he calls them.](#)

[That same Jesus remembers every child who graced our summer VBS programs here at Church. He remembers all the kids from youth group, Sunday School, and Confirmation classes. He remembers the families who once attended and have drifted off. He remembers every one of them. He calls them to discipleship and lives of following him again.](#)

Amazingly they walk from their nets, their boats, even their father. See the power of Jesus call? It is not based on some rational argument or convincing words. Jesus just promises to upend their lives and they go. This doesn't make sense. It is not like he offered them a million dollars or some promise of success. He offers them a new job, not promise of success. They will fish for men. We know from the rest of the Gospels that Peter and company did not always succeed in when they fished for fish. Would they be better at fishing for men?

But they just drop it all and follow him. That Jesus is still working today, still calling, still bringing men and women to follow him in strange and adventurous lives of discipleship. We often think we need to make being a Christian a sensible or rational thing. We believe that we need to argue the merits of going to church, "Your marriage will be better!" or "You will be more content." But this is just cheap therapy and not as good as you can get down the street at the counselors office. What makes this work is that Jesus is the one calling, the Holy Spirit impelling. We don't make this work; He does!

We all know those folks who are out there who used to go to this congregation. Perhaps they are waiting for an invite from Jesus through you. Pick up that phone, walk up to their door, visit them. Invite them. Remember Jesus promises to go with you into that house/conversation and your words might just be the instrument he uses to work this same miracle in which he gathered these disciples in the reading today.

Don't make too much sense of Jesus' invitation. Peter and Andrew will follow him all the way to crucifixion if the stories are true. James will be killed by Herod's soldiers with a sword in Acts. There is no rationalizing this. But today Jesus is calling and folks are answering that call and following him. Remember, if today is a normal day, 100,000 new Christians were made today. He is still doing this even now.

2. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." (That Jesus' call to the people of my parish would be heard and create in them the angler's passion for the mission of Christ's Kingdom.)

Jesus calls us to a life of fishing, not a life of talking about fishing.

I know a few fishermen. I am a casual angler, and not very good at that. A few times a year I will grab the kids and find a place where we can throw a hook and line in the water and, if we are lucky, we will bring a few home. Most of the time, we just have the fun of fishing, not the protein. But the real fishermen pursue their finned subjects with a zeal which borders on religious. They invest hours, dollars, and more into their passion. They love it. It is this sort of fisherman I think we are preaching toward today.

Jesus did not only call men to life-changing discipleship long ago, he does it today. In this sermon, he will call your people to such a discipleship. But that will of course be a much more potent and effective call if you also have heard it. Before you write this

sermon, take the time to think about what excites you about ministry, about the kingdom of God, and what has brought you to this point of standing in a pulpit and addressing the people of God.

I remember needing to be reminded of that when I came to write sermons once in a while. It is not a problem, but it is a reality of our lives. The problems can start to seem like the real thing and the beautiful work of love, forgiveness, restoration, and new life can be obscured by the garbage of life. If you are having one of those days, stop and scrape the junk aside. Spend a few moments looking at the beauty. Remember why you are here.

Most of your people, if they hear the word evangelism, or worse “board of evangelism,” applied to them, find their breathing restricted and the beginnings of an anxiety attack upon them. Yet get them started on a good film or a good restaurant they have recently visited, and you cannot get them to shut up. Jesus made passionate anglers out of these men, a metaphor they already understood, but perhaps one which they had also forgotten in the drudgery of repairing nets, paying for boats, and working long hours at it. He did this, not by telling them to go and do more, but by revealing to them what God was doing.

Our people don't need you to tell them to do more. They are already doing that to themselves rather well, I would guess. They need to see God in action. I can tell you stories of angry old men reconciled in the Sacrament, of prayers answered, and people transformed by hearing sermons, experiencing Christian acts of love, and even reading the Bible. But those should not be the stories you tell in this sermon. You need to tell your stories, and best if it is a story which your congregation itself knows and in which it can share.

Jesus called these men and then went out and healed real sicknesses and restored the eyes of real blind people. He comforted sinners and blessed children. All the while his disciples, whom he called to be fishers of men, were watching and marveling. When their day to witness came, the Sanhedrin, beatings, imprisonment, and more could not keep them quiet. (See Acts 3-7) Today, as he repeats this call to your people, point out to them this same Jesus at work in your congregation, in your life, in their lives.

That vision will empower their witness, overcome their fear, and make them passionate anglers in God's fishing business. Show them Christ.

3. “The cross is the power of God” (That the Spirit of God unites the members of this parish in the peculiar, up-side-down cruciform kingdom of Christ which has declared every sinner precious in the eyes of God.)

What makes us united? Is it because we agree with one another? I hope not! What makes us one is that Jesus agrees in his estimation of us. We are helpless sinners for whom he has died. That is what unites us, that is the mind and judgment which has made us one.

This sermon will really be revolving around the theology of the Cross. If you are not familiar with such a theology or just a little rusty on it, I would recommend that you reacquaint yourself. Althaus' work on the theology of Luther is a good place to start, but so are many other resources. Paul's words here are one of the primary locations for those who assert the theology of the cross over against the theology of glory and any sermon which preaches from this text will likely need to express something of this.

This theology of the cross speaks potently to real congregations which are always made up of sinners of every stripe. First it tells them that God's kingdom is not measured by the standards of the world. God's victory was won on the day when Jesus lost his life. The greatest preacher of Christendom's first generation was one of its first persecutors. The very letter we are reading from the persecutor turned preacher is addressed to a congregation which was profoundly troubled. This letter's enduring words, written to a profoundly troubled situation, have continued to inspire and work good for the last two thousand years.

Our congregation is not a perfect place by the world's standards, nor is it a perfect place by your standards, but it is in just places that God has always done his work, whether we are talking about a brutal hill outside Jerusalem's walls, a persecutor's path to Damascus, or the morally challenged folks of Corinth. Our failures and weaknesses are not impediments to the kingdom of God, they may even be the occasions for him to do great work.

Example? Many congregations really thrive in the periods of their vacancy. Some of them will assert they do some of their best work in these times. Weakness, problems are all opportunities for God.

Do you remember the Amish who made such a witness to the world when the deranged killer slaughtered the little girls? They forgave the man, even gave money to his children because they had lost their father. God's kingdom light shone brightly on the day of their terrible grief and pain.

But this is not a call to wallow in our sin, content with who we are and to let God take care of it all. Paul urges unity upon the people, because God has done great work and continues to do great work, and integral to that great work is meeting us in our worst moments, redeeming us, and engaging us in that kingdom of the cross' work. The theology of the cross means that we are united in what Christ has done to us and now through us to the folks around us. **It isn't about us, our glory, our fame, our pride, egos, or anything else. It is about him and he has graciously forgiven and redeemed**

me and all. When I see that what Christ has done to the enemy and to me are the same thing, doesn't that change the conflict?

Do we hear what Paul is saying here? He is not taking sides because all the sides are irrelevant before the cross. To take these sides and maintain them becomes fundamentally a denial of the cross on which Jesus has died for everyone in the room and outside the room for that matter. The cross and its magnitude for me and you reduces the differences we see and feel so acutely to discussions of strategy, not goal. The church is not ours, it is his. This ministry is not our ministry, it is his through us.

Christ, hands perforated by his self-sacrifice, risen from his grave, has made his claim on us all in our baptism and faith, transcending our differences by transcending the death and sin which unites us all in this life. He has made those who were near and far into one people, his people (Ephesians 2).

4. The Lord is my Light and My Salvation! (That the Spirit of God encourage and build up these hearers toward lives of confident service in His Kingdom.)

This sermon will simply work its way through the text of the psalm. Thus the Psalm itself is the outline of the sermon.

Introduction:

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

Here is where we are going – but a goal is a Law and a Gospel statement of sorts. It is law because it points out where we are and how far we have to go. I am afraid of many things. My faith is not always determining my outlook on life, but my old human self often wins that argument. Thus I am afraid and that fear cripples my service to God. It makes no sense, really. God really is my light and salvation, he really is my stronghold and life, so why is it so hard to live in that truth? How can that change for me? The psalmist proclaims God's answer to these questions.

²When evildoers assail me
to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes,
it is they who stumble and fall.

³Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.

Law Development:

The Christian is not confident because he or she has no enemies. Indeed the Psalmist has lots of them, an entire army that encamps against him. We too have lots of reasons to be afraid and they are all good reasons. Death is terrifying. Will my resources be enough or will I end up in some terrible situation when I am 80 and helpless to do anything about it? Will the cancer that took my father or mother get me too? Will my family be safe? What will come of me? These questions and thousands more like them haunt us, assail us. David may have had an actual army encamped against him in the battles of Israel, but we have no fewer foes, just different foes, and often more implacable. Death is merciless.

But notice throughout this that the psalmist is confident. Where does he get that? I want some of that. It is too often lacking in my life and in our congregation. How can David know that his enemies will stumble and fall? Can he really know?

⁴ One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will lift me high upon a rock.

Gospel Development:

The solution to our fear is not that we conquer our enemies. Death is too much for us and the many things that make our lives miserable are simply beyond our control. Who can know what economic disaster lurks in the banking industry? We are truly powerless before these things, but God is not. David wants simply to dwell in the house of the Lord, to gaze upon the face of God.

This is not some escapist fantasy of David. He realizes that the solution is not found in our coping with sin or our mastery of its effects. For all our medical progress, people still die at an astonishingly high rate. The only solution that problem and indeed the solution of all our problems is ultimately found in God.

⁶ And now my head shall be lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Resolution:

David's confidence, expressed once more at the end of the psalm is not the confidence of a man who has conquered his foes or the man who has it within his power to conquer them, but it is the confidence which comes being precious to God. God is the solution, not me.

But this has real implications for the current life of David. Though surrounded and besieged, he offers his sacrifices to God with festive joy. He sings and makes melody to God, bearing witness to the goodness of his God all his days. David is living in the truth of his faith, embodying the reality which God has spoken and which the enemy has refused to acknowledge but which one day must obtain.

⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸ You have said, "Seek my face."

My heart says to you,
"Your face, LORD, do I seek."

⁹ Hide not your face from me.
Turn not your servant away in anger,
O you who have been my help.
Cast me not off; forsake me not,
O God of my salvation!

David's Prayer and Our Prayer:

David is not just remembering a moment of his distress, he is in it. The enemy which encamps against him is real, just as our fears are often firmly fixed on the real things that mean us true harm. Confidence is not easy in this situation, it is not a simple "connect the dots" sort of thing. David makes his sacrifices and hears the drums of his enemy beating outside the tabernacle's flaps. We sing a hymn, put our offering in the plate and know that tomorrow we get the test results from the doctor.

Faith is not the recognition of what we see, but a confidence rooted in something which we trust but often do not see. For the person who awaits the news from a doctor, news that might be a diagnosis of a terminal illness, David offers up this good news. There is no enemy, not even death, which is greater than God's salvation. David lost battles too. Finally he lost that battle and he died, or as the OT says, he was gathered to his fathers. But God did not turn from him in anger. The cross on which the Son of David died proclaims God's love. David's death was not God forsaking him, but another occasion when God saved. For David, gathered to his fathers, rests in God this day. No matter what the doctor says on Monday, no matter what the world might throw at us, even death itself, God is the God of your salvation. It is what Jesus name means, after all. He saves.

