

1.22.2023 Epiphany 3

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Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

“The power of the cross”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Moments of decision and transition happen in our lives as we move us from one chapter of our human journey to the next. Often such moments are marked by birthdays and graduations, moments when others celebrate with us. At other times, however, the chapter markers in our lives may be harder to discern or find meaning in, as we move from one job to another, one city to another, from one ending to another new beginning. Such moments may feel like we are making a decision while others may feel as if decisions are being thrust upon us.

While we often only focus on Jesus calling his first disciples, today’s gospel actually contains three different moments of transition and decision. The first such moment describes John the Baptist’s arrest, effectively ending his role in the gospel narrative. The second describes Jesus withdrawing to the region of Galilee, making his home in Capernaum, and the third is the response of Andrew, Peter, James and John to Jesus’ call to follow him.

Each of these three different moments help us see the variety of decisions and transitions that we may experience in our lives. After John baptized Jesus, he probably knew that his ministry of baptizing at the Jordan was coming to an end. This was a life transition thrust upon John, and though he perhaps took satisfaction that he had prepared the way for Jesus, he may have also sensed that his life was in jeopardy. Jesus, too, must have sensed this because Matthew tells us that when Jesus heard about John’s arrest, he “*withdrew to Galilee*” – which was about as far as he go from Jerusalem and remain in Palestine.

Jesus’ choice of Capernaum in Galilee is crucial information. Galilee was the northern most region of Palestine, bordering Phoenicia and the Mediterranean to the west, Syria to the northeast, and Samaria to the south. In the same way as Isaiah, Matthew describes this northern region of Galilee as the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, regions that had been occupied by Israel but overrun in antiquity by Assyria. Capernaum in northern Galilee was a region of intense cultural and ethnic diversity, described by Isaiah as “*Galilee of the nations*,” and by Matthew as “*Galilee of the Gentiles*.” Jesus had moved to the crossroads of the north, a diverse place of languages and cultures, intersected by the roads of commerce and trade. In antiquity, Galilee was a stop on roads leading everywhere, yet by the early Middle Ages, Capernaum had all but disappeared. In Jesus’

day, however, Capernaum was a populous and diverse city of perhaps 15,000 inhabitants, standing at ancient crossroads, open to new ideas and change. It was to this place that Jesus made the strategic decision to move; it was here that Jesus began his ministry.

Yet it also seems a bit surprising that Jesus chose a place that would eventually disappear. In other words, Capernaum was an ideal place to begin, but Capernaum itself was not the final destination of Jesus' work. There would be many more places along Jesus' way – places of proclamation, healing and ministry. Jesus also knew that there would be a future moment of decision when he would also have to travel to Jerusalem, arrest and the cross.

The name "*Galilee of the nations*" or "*Galilee of the Gentiles*" also hints at the future global nature of the gospel message. When Peter, Andrew, James and John made the decision to follow Jesus, they could not have known they would proclaim a message that would be carried on roads far beyond Capernaum as a light to all nations and people. In today's gospel, we see three different moments in which people acted in God's unfolding salvation story. The ongoing miracle is that God continues to be with us in our moments of decision and transition as we also seek to follow Jesus in our lives.

What have been the moments in your life when you have clearly felt God's leading as you moved confidently from one place to another, and what have been other moments when you felt as if you were walking by faith and not by sight?

My wife and I experienced one such moment when we decided to return from mission service in Japan. I clearly remember the moment I locked the front door of our home in Tokyo, knowing that 28 years of global service were coming to a close. We did not know where the Holy Spirit was leading us, except to return to the U.S. It was a bit frightening to leave a place of many blessings and a clear sense of God's presence. Like Peter, Andrew, James and John, we were attempting to follow the voice of Jesus in our lives, yet this also meant not knowing where the Spirit was leading us. What I am attempting to describe, and encouraging you to think about in your own life, are moments when you felt as if you were leaving everything behind to follow Jesus again.

I share my own experience with you, hoping that it may help you to remember moments in your life when you felt as if you were walking by faith, not quite able to clearly see into God's future. It could have been a new city, a new job, a new school, a new career, or it could have been the loss of a job, illness, brokenness, disaster, or the death of a loved one. God's grace comes to us at such moments, as Jesus calls us over and over to follow him. Like his first disciples, Jesus' call comes

in the midst of our daily life, where we work, in our community, in our church, and in our family life. Over and over Jesus calls us to discipleship – asking us to live into the power of his resurrection by embracing the power of his cross.

These first disciples could not have known that they would become heralds of the good news of Jesus' resurrection and servants to his cross. The witness of these disciples spread outward on ancient crossroads from Jerusalem, Galilee, Antioch, Alexandria to Asia, Africa and Europe.

Though much larger, it occurs to me that Charlotte might also be compared to Capernaum, because Charlotte is a diverse city, standing at the crossroads of commerce between north and south, east and west. Like Capernaum in its day, Charlotte is a diverse city of new ideas and change. We also live in an ideal place to share the light and the hope of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus called his disciples, he called them to follow him, sharing good news for all people. Jesus calls everyday people, like you and me, to walk with him and to serve with him. The call of Jesus will lead you over and over to his cross of servanthood for others, to give of your energy, time and resources. At this moment, all over the world, people in diverse languages and cultures like us, are giving selflessly of themselves, proclaiming the gospel in word and deed.

This is the power of the cross that Paul describes. Jesus calls each of us into the servanthood of his cross for others. How has the power of Jesus' cross lifted you, healed you, and given you a vision to live in service for others. At what moments in your life has Jesus called you, and how have you responded?

Jesus calls you again today – follow him. Through you, he will offer light in the darkness. Through you, he will offer healing and hope to a broken world.

Through you, he is alive in this world.

*Through you. Amen.*