

The Rev. Kerith Harding's Sermon January 22, 2017 – Christian Leadership

Today's Gospel tells the story of the call of four of the disciples. Fishermen by the lakeside, Peter, Andrew, James and John were busy doing their work, throwing a net into the sea. They were minding their own business when Jesus entered the scene. We can presume, they didn't think anything cataclysmic was about to occur. They didn't imagine that on this day by the Sea of Galilee, they would go from ordinary unknown fishermen to the most recognizable names in Christianity. Certainly, their minds were elsewhere, probably on the quality of the net, their hope for the day's catch, maybe their aching shoulders or calloused hands.

And then a new face arrives.

"Follow me," Jesus says to them.

And with that the men dropped their nets and embarked on a wild adventure into the unknown — at first an **exciting** adventure to new towns full of new people,

then an **amazing** adventure as they watched as Jesus healed the sick and cleansed lepers,

then an adventure **both dreadful and terrifying**, watching helplessly as Jesus was crucified on a terrible Friday afternoon.

And finally, an **ennobling** adventure, were the Spirit descended, gifting them each with the courage and capacity to take the gospel message to so many others in the region.

With that one encounter by the lakeside, they got pulled into the divine drama, and their lives never were the same.

It so often happens this way.

God does not give us advanced notice that things are about to change.

One day we might be plugging along in our ordinary lives, and the next we are being called upon to do something extraordinary.

It might just be that we are in one of those times now.

It has been an exciting, emotional weekend in the US and around the world. A LOT has happened. And regardless whom you cast your vote for in November, the country woke up yesterday to a new president, and to marches worldwide where millions gathered, championing the rights of women. Historians assured us that never before has protest greeted an inauguration the way it did this weekend. Democracy is very much alive.

I know a few of you marched down at UHMC and sent me pictures or posted them to Facebook. My only gesture of solidarity was to dress my crabby son in pink pants for the day and watch it on TV.

It is likely in historic moments like these that we don't all know what to do or when to do it.

In other words, when God enters our lives, how we respond matters.

Saying yes to a new moment in history matters.

When we feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit, the subtle invitation of Jesus to embark with him on a journey, we are called to respond.

So how do we do it? How do we respond to God in ways that feel authentic, genuine, and like we aren't taking the easy way out?

How do we know we are being true to ourselves, while also accepting an inevitable degree of uncertainty, and maybe fear? How do we, when the time calls for it, allow ourselves to become not just Christians, but Christian leaders?

A few characteristics of Christian leadership:

**First, it's not for the careerist or ambitious or the proud;** quite the opposite. Most of the Old Testament prophets and many of the disciples of Jesus were reluctant to accept the call. Sara, Abraham's wife, laughed when told she would give birth to the boy Isaac. Jeremiah, when called by Yahweh, argued he was too young, and Moses's excuse was that he had a speech impediment! (I always got a kick out of the fact that in response to Moses's excuse, God essentially said, "Fine. I'll give you your brother Aaron as a spokesperson.") (We can see Moses thinking, "Oh shoot. That wasn't what I was going for.") Something about authentic invitations make

us believe we are not up to the task, we are not worthy of the position. They're characterized by a -- "Me? You sure?"

**Second, being summoned by God is a personal thing.** It is unique to the individual, set within the context of our relationship to Jesus, and not something another can impose upon us from the outside. It springs from deep within us. Ali and I have two friends: one who went to Wharton Business School and then to Wall Street before discerning a vocation to the Jesuits. And another who became a Jesuit before leaving and working at Wall Street, and becoming one of the leading Roman Catholic philanthropists of our time. To human eyes, their lives appear to have moved in diametrically opposing directions. but they both moved toward God. They each responded uniquely, and their ministries have borne great fruit. Each had to respond to God's invitation to a fuller, deeper, more meaningful life.

**Third, following Jesus' call to leadership will almost surely lead us into some suffering** — either our own, or we will be asked to sit with and become frighteningly intimate with another's, and maybe advocate on their behalf.

No Christian leader has embarked on their life of discipleship without bearing some burdens along the way. Look at our own church's founder, Shim Yin Chin, who answered the call to serve God's people on Maui, only to have to leave behind his wife and children in China. Look at Jesus' mother Mary, who gave birth far from home, and a mere 32 years later would watch as her precious son was unjustly executed by the state for being a threat to the political and religious authorities. We've watched as members of our own community have responded to the call from family, and have moved to Washington or Oahu or the Big Island, often against their deepest wishes, to be with family who need them. And we've known others who have blessedly joined us here because they felt the tug somewhere new and made the journey to Maui and to this church. When we are called into discipleship, we are called into the paschal mystery, which involves real human suffering, and then, somehow, redemption of that suffering. Not always immediately, but inevitably. And that's a promise.

**Finally, as Christian leaders our response will always best be characterized by love.** St. Ignatius famously wrote, “Love ought to show itself in deeds, not in words.” I cannot imagine that the women who watched Jesus get crucified were not taken over with anger at the injustice of it all, but Christian responses are love-filled. They bear fruit. They heal. They help lift others’ burdens. They put another’s needs before their own... Righteous anger has a place in discipleship, for sure, and sometimes it is the fire of anger that gets us moving in the first place. That anger fuels something constructive -- a change in policy, a new ministry, whatever... Ultimately, the fruits are loving, and produce an increase in love, faith and hope.

Unfortunately, Jesus no longer swings by our places of work and interrupts us to get us moving on the path of discipleship. But he does nudge us. He still is very much alive. When a sick friend is always on your mind, that’s Jesus nudging you toward action. When an article or a news piece has your passion for justice stirred against injustice, that’s the Spirit, pushing you further into the messiness of human life. These are rarely moments we celebrate, because they feel initially inconvenient and poorly timed. But God does not work according to our calendars; God works according to God’s calendar. Today and every day, may we embrace God’s call to leadership with love and humility. AMEN.