

Epiphany 3A (1/22/2017)

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27:1, 4-9

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

**Matthew 4:12-23**

*Discipleship takes place in between promise and fulfillment. Jesus' call to follow him involves a great deal of sacrifice and no guarantees. Yet, he "summons with irresistible authority," inviting us over and over to join him in pursuit of God's kingdom come on Earth as in heaven. The hope of this alternative reality, the beloved community that God has dreamed for us, is worth the uncertainty of discipleship in the in-between.*

This is a peculiar time in the church year. The time after Epiphany stands apart from the liturgical seasons that come before and after. We're no longer in Advent and Christmas, when we anticipate and celebrate Jesus' birth and epiphany. And we've yet to enter Lent and Easter, when we prepare for and bear witness to his passion and resurrection. In the several weeks between the blue, white, purple, and white of the church's holy seasons, we find ourselves surrounded by the green of Ordinary Time. And, it's no coincidence that this is the time – the time that hangs between Epiphany and Lent – that we hear the story of Jesus calling his first disciples away from their ordinary lives and into the unknown.<sup>1</sup>

**Discipleship takes place between promise and fulfillment.** In his birth and baptism, Jesus shines forth as a light to the people who dwell in darkness and emerges as God's Beloved Child with whom God is well pleased.

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<sup>1</sup> See David Toole, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 286.

In his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus assumes his role as God's faithful Servant, who pours himself out in love even unto death, yet who overcomes death, opening to us the way of everlasting life. The call to follow him occurs in between these decisive events. The story is begun, but from the perspective of the fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, it has yet to be finished. They are strangely compelled by Jesus' summons – drawn away from the lives they know to a radically new reality – yet they have no idea where he will lead them. So, **discipleship means abiding in the in-between.**

And, this is as true for us as it was for them. We don't have to pretend that we don't know the end of the story – that God finally triumphs over the hostility of the cross – in order to acknowledge that we, too, are subject to the uncertainty of discipleship. We cling to the promise of resurrection, yes, but **even as we trust God to bring new life from death, we are bombarded with signs that the hostility of the cross is really all there is.** Self-centeredness and indifference and injustice and loss rear their ugly heads too often to be ignored, and chip away at God's vision for abundant life in human community, a life in which the poor and the peacemakers and the mourners and the merciful are blessed. So, **why leave your boat to follow Jesus when the way ultimately seems to lead nowhere? Why exchange the life you**

**know for the kingdom of God when you fear it may be nothing more than a pleasant delusion?**

Jesus' call to discipleship involves a great deal of sacrifice and no guarantees. Disciples are certainly not spared the pain of human life; in fact, they're expected to take up crosses of their own. So, why on Earth do Simon, Andrew, James, and John drop everything to walk in the footsteps of this mysterious Rabbi? And, why do we keep coming back, confessing our shortcomings and renewing our commitment to follow Jesus out the doors of this church and into all the places life leads?<sup>2</sup> **The sensible thing to do is to simply ignore his call, finish mending our nets, and carry on with our lives, doubtful that God's dream for us can ever be realized.**

This week, I've been thinking about the resilience of latter-day disciples, especially those involved in the movement for Civil Rights. This past Monday, we propped up Martin Luther King, Jr. once again as an American hero, but we have conveniently forgotten that he was met with ferocious opposition at every turn. Of course, King bore a cross for his faithfulness to the movement for racial, political, and economic justice, following Jesus all the way to a martyr's death. Yet, he never lost hope, trusting that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice,"<sup>3</sup> to borrow his own words.

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<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Brugh and Gordon Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly*, 228.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlktempleisraelhollywood.htm>.

In April 1968, King preached a sermon at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, in which he spoke to the reality of discipleship in the in-between:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

He was murdered the next day.

King's steadiness of faith is remarkable in light of the evil he faced, and his fortitude may seem out of our reach today. But, we are all called to faithfulness in the thick of uncertainty; we are all called to discipleship in the in-between. Dear church, **Jesus "summons [us] with irresistible authority,"<sup>5</sup> to quote a commentator, inviting us over and over to join him in pursuit of God's kingdom come on Earth as in heaven. It's a risky proposition. But, the hope of this alternative reality, the beloved community that God has dreamed for us, is worth the uncertainty of discipleship in the in-between. So, leave your nets and your apprehensions behind, and follow.**

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<sup>4</sup> Ed. James Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 286.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Hare, as cited by Troy A. Miller, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 289.