

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

Delivered: Sunday, January 25, 2015

Theme: ***Open Call***

Text: **Psalm 62:5-1 (Inclusive Bible) and Mark 1:14-20 (NRSV)**

In God alone my soul finds rest, for my deliverance comes from God, who alone is my rock, my salvation, my fortress: I will never be shaken.

How long will you besiege me as though I were a crumbling wall or a tottering fence? They connive to push me off a cliff; they delight in telling lies. With their mouths they utter blessing, but in their hearts they curse.

In God alone my soul finds rest, for my deliverance comes from God, who alone is my rock, my salvation, my fortress: I will never be shaken.

Only in God—my deliverance, my glory—my refuge is God. Trust in God always, my people; pour out your hearts before God our refuge. Humankind is but a breath, mortals are just an illusion. Put them on the scales and the balance is thrown off: they weigh less than a breath. Do not trust in extortion, or put false hopes in stolen goods; do not set your heart on riches even when they increase. For God has said only one thing, only two do I know: that to God alone belongs power, and that you, Yahweh, are loving—you repay all people according to their deeds.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Reflections: “Open Call”

For these last two Sundays - the second and third Sundays of Epiphany, the lectionary has provided us with scriptures which revolve around the idea of CALL. Last week, we explored who's (who is) or whose (who me?) calling as we delved into the story of the young Samuel, called by God to deliver a rather terrifying message to his mentor, Eli, and, as a result, to become a prophet himself, bringing the word of God to the next generation and beyond.

This week, we move out of the Hebrew testament and into the Greek and dive into Mark's hurry-up-I-must-be-going account of Jesus' life and ministry as the newly baptized Jesus, following on the heels of the newly-imprisoned John the Baptizer, makes his way to Galilee and heads to the shoreline to begin calling his disciples from their fishing and net-mending; asking them to get OFF board their boats and ON board his ministerial ship. “I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you,” the Message has Jesus saying. “I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass.”

And here's the thing. “They dropped everything they had immediately and followed!” Say what?!

As you sit here on the last Sunday of January, you might remember something I said on the first Sunday in January as the season of Epiphany began. That's asking too much isn't it?!

Way back then, I explained to the children what the word epiphany means as part of our “Chalking the Door” ceremony. I told them that to our modern ear, an epiphany may be understood as an experience of a sudden and striking realization. Like, you're walking along or talking about something

with your friend and, suddenly, you realize something you had never thought about before, or something occurs to you that feels like it must have come straight from God.

I also told them that the Epiphany we talk about in the church is kind of like that same experience, in that it's about the time when the wise men visited Jesus after he was born and they had a kind of epiphany that He was the son of God. Although, in actuality, the word comes from the idea mined from the original Greek word that means "to appear" as in God APPEARED to us in Jesus.

And what did the wise men do when Jesus APPEARED to them? Why, they fell down and worshipped and offered him gifts. Interesting, then, that as Jesus starts out on his ministry and APPEARS to the wise guys we find in today's story, that they also have an epiphany and respond to their own inner call to follow the One whom God has given them the innate wisdom to do so. And even BETTER than gold, frankincense and myrrh, they give the greatest gifts they have – themselves.

"Epiphany is an immediate and meaningful understanding of something. Surprising. Sudden. Profound," Karoline Lewis wrote in her article this week called, "The Immediately of Epiphany." "I think," she writes, "that "immediately" can be less about marking time and more about describing action. Immediately does not only designate a when but a what. Not only a place in time, but an event that changes the meaning of life. Granted, the disciples have no clue at this point how life has been changed. But we know. And maybe immediately is all we can do, all we can manage... Maybe a life of faith can only happen in immediately, in the surprising, sudden, profound epiphany of God at work, God revealed in our lives."

I've been thinking a lot these last few weeks about the word, "Call" and our response to it. Call can mean so many different things. In the ministry, we certainly consider the Call of Christ to be our Call to Ministry. But God's call is really so much more than a vocational call. I think call needs to be thought of in all its various meanings.

(sing?) "I have heard you calling in the night," we sing in that beautiful song, "Here I Am," and, indeed, I have often heard God calling to me in the night and not just telling me where to go, but how to deal, how to cope, how to work out a situation or relationship.

And I will tell you that it is in my immediate response to that Call that I feel peace and know that I am being and will be led to work out whatever's going on because God is on the journey with me, and calling out to me. Oh, don't' get me wrong... there are many times I'm tempted to argue or prevaricate, hoping that in my hedging I won't have to do what I know I'm being called to. But, really, I'm just delaying the best way.

When we don't respond immediately to God with our whole hearts and souls and minds, we may know God will keep walking with us and calling out to us, but we can also know the road won't be as smooth and the path won't be as straight as when we've responded immediately to God's stillspeaking voice.

As I mentioned last week, our call doesn't end when we say YES. It really just begins. Once we have accepted our call to walk with Christ, we must listen even more intently for God's call in our lives to justice, to peace, to forgiveness and, most especially, to love.

When does God call to you? Where has God asked you to go? What has God asked you to do, be and proclaim? When have you listened and when have you not and what was the outcome of both?

Where is God calling us in our lives to step up, to embrace what is right and good and true? Where are we closing ourselves off to Christ's call and not listening to God's voice?

"There is nothing comfortable about epiphanies," Professor Lewis writes. "They rock your world."

How ready are we to leave all we know, drop everything and follow the One who would lead us? How ready are we to leave our preconceived notions of what we think is "the right way" and follow that Call we know God is placing on our hearts? What kind of faith is it that allows us to do such a radical

thing? What kind of freedom do we have to possess and cultivate to be ready to respond immediately to such a call?

In an interview for *The Washington Times*, the exquisite writer Anne Lamott said, "I think joy and sweetness and affection are a spiritual path. We're here to know God, to love and serve God, and to be blown away by the beauty and miracle of nature. You just have to get rid of so much baggage to be light enough to dance, to sing, to play. You don't have time to carry grudges; you don't have time to cling to the need to be right."

Freeing ourselves from that which binds us, whether it be our grudges, our resentments or the routine of our workaday lives, we not only hear God's call more clearly, but are ready and able to respond to it with the immediacy of the disciples as they lay down their fishnets and climbed out of their boats, these things that represented everything familiar, comfortable and secure to them.
(change slide)

Hanging above my desk in my office downstairs is a large print by N.C. Wyeth which I obtained at the beautiful Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania a few years ago as I had the opportunity to explore the extraordinary work that N.C. and his son Andrew Wyeth and grandson Jamie Wyeth were all called to create. This print depicts the young Robinson Crusoe from Daniel Defoe's masterpiece, standing along the shore, knife in hand, dog and rifle at his feet carving words into a large wooden cross, illustrating the passage written beneath it: "making it into a great cross, I set it upon the shore where I first landed..."

This print speaks to me in many ways. Hopefully, the cross is pretty self-evident, but reading and reaching into it, I notice the shore, and the water stretching out beyond the horizon, farther than the eye can see behind those puffy white clouds. Here begins the adventure. The young Robinson cannot know what is before him and he has scant little to take with him on the journey. Castaway on this remote place, he marks time on the cross and ventures forth on his own, eventually finding God and expressing gratitude, even amidst the loneliness of the wilderness in which he finds himself.
(change slide)

Sometimes, God calls us away from all that we know and asks us to leave that which we think brings us security. Sometimes we must lay down that which we believe protects us and open ourselves to that which can move and transform us even though we have no idea where that will take us.

"When I was twenty-two, when the Call was new and fearsome, I felt overwhelmed by those famous and simultaneous qualities of attraction (*mysterium fascinans*) and repulsion (*mysterium tremendum*) so many people experience," Suzanne Guthrie writes on her fascinating blog, "At the Edge of the Enclosure." "I thought at the time that a threshold appeared before me, and I knew eventually I'd go through, but for now, I fought against that inevitable surrender. A cartoonish image came to mind, a Warner Brothers kind of character - except rather than Wile E. Coyote or Sylvester - it was me comically straddling the door jamb, resisting being sucked into what seemed a bottomless, foggy, nothingness whirlwind beyond."

"That was The Call for me-inevitable, but unknown, and, of course, beyond my control. Finally, exhausted, somehow I took the step, or slid through, or, fell asleep and woke up on the other side.

"You'd think that after forty years, faith would get easier," Suzanne writes. "But I still struggle intellectually and morally and spiritually. I resist every threshold of widening consciousness, opportunities to grow and to love and to grow in love. I question, doubt, grumble, guffaw, choke on my pride, revel maniacally in distractions and exhaust myself with avoidance of Divine Presence.

Nevertheless, The Call is renewed every day, and I've learned to respond in some way. And all I want is the very thing I resist, that is, to surrender in love."

How beautiful is that? I found it incredibly encouraging to read that even someone whom I respect greatly for her deep intellectual and spiritual curiosity and discourse on our texts each week finds herself having to "work" the call after forty years of being called. And she, as I, find at the conclusion that

it really is all about surrendering in love – day by day, step by step, inch by inch as Christ calls us to follow.

As we continue to step into our own callings, let us not forget that God also calls us as a Church. Are we as a body gathered listening for God's voice? Where is God leading us this year? What ideas and projects does God want us to consider and move on? Can we drop our own proverbial nets and fish in the waters Jesus is calling us to? Let's explore our Call as Christ's Body manifest as we gather for lunch and our Annual meeting today and listen for God's voice as we journey and decide together.

"Blessing the Nets" by Jan Richardson:

You could cast it
in your sleep,
its familiar arc
embedded in your
muscle memory
after months
years
a lifetime
of gathering in
what you thought
would sustain you
forever.

You would not
have imagined
it would be so easy
to cast aside,
would never have believed
the immediacy
with which your hands
could release their
familiar grip,
could let it go,
could let it simply continue
its arcing path
away from you.

But when the call came
you did not hesitate,
did not pause,
did not delay
to follow,
as if your body
had suddenly remembered
the final curve
of the arc,
as if the release
begun in your hands
now passed through you

entirely
and you let go
of everything
to cast yourself
with abandon
upon the waiting
world.

Amen.