

Third Sunday In Epiphany
26 January 2003
St. George's Episcopal Church
Le Mars, Iowa
The Rev. Karen A. H. Wacome, Presiding
Dr. Donald H. Wacome, Lay Preaching

Jeremiah 3.21-4.2
Psalm 130
1 Corinthians 7.17-23
Mark 1.14-20

On A Mission From God

One of the great works of contemporary art - though not, perhaps, in the same league as *Waiting For Godot* [referred to in the Vicar's sermon last week] is the 1980 film *The Blues Brothers*. Jake and Elwood Blues are trying to raise money to pay the back taxes on a Catholic school, but they are hotly pursued by several police departments, neo-Nazis, angry creditors and a murderous jilted fiancé. On several occasions, when their plight looks most hopeless, Elwood played by Dan Ackroyd – turns to his brother Jake – played by John Belushi --and with serene confidence says “*They’ll never catch us. We’re on a mission from God!*”

The brief text from Mark’s Gospel we have for today’s lesson portrays four men setting out on a mission from God. What are to make of this cryptic account of the calling of Jesus’ first disciples? The alacrity with which they drop everything and set off with Jesus suggests there’s a fuller story Mark doesn’t tell. One possibility, given that he sets the stage with “*Now after John was arrested...*” is that Simon and Andrew, and James and John, had been disciples of John the Baptist, and biding their time in the aftermath of his arrest, have returned to what they were doing before taking up with John. I wonder whether this doesn’t cast them as religiously intense young men, earnest seekers after righteousness and Israel’s Messiah, and thus doesn’t fit the way they’re portrayed as Mark’s Gospel unfolds. For the picture that emerges is of guys who are more or less clueless, who seem unable to get what Jesus is about, or to focus on why Jesus called them. It’s notable that the lesson that might have been hardest for them to learn if they were seriously pious Jews is the one lesson they seem to learn right away: for by the next chapter Jesus is getting complaints that his disciples do not fast and even break the Sabbath by plucking grain to eat as they walk through the fields.

My contrasting picture is of restless, unreliable, even irresponsible characters – we can’t miss the obvious fact that two of the brothers simply abandon their father in the boat, not what good sons do in that culture..maybe just a bit more like the Blues Brothers than our pious picture suggests. I think of what Jesus says when he calls the first two, Simon and Andrew: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people” as demonstrated by the call of the next two, John and James. Jesus isn’t being choosy. This isn’t retail fishing with poles and hooks, one fish at a time. It’s fishing wholesale: down goes the net and whatever happens to be there gets caught, the cod and the scrod, the good and the bad, the worthy and the worthless, indiscriminately, all together.

Jesus calls these men to follow him, to be with him, to take up his work in the world, but what they do doesn't appear to amount to much. The disciples love being in the entourage of this wildly popular, mysterious wonderworker but they are pretty much worthless as disciples, as men meaningfully sharing in Jesus' mission. They bring around the boat, or fetch a donkey, but mostly we see them misunderstanding Jesus, not grasping what he means or who he is, and getting in the way, even interfering with people who are trying to connect with Jesus. And of course when Jesus is arrested they take off, except for Simon – renamed Peter – but he ends up shabbily denying Jesus.

Considering the matter in ordinary terms, we have to say Jesus does a bad job of choosing disciples. But that misses the point of what it means for Jesus to call people to be his disciples. It's not about what those he calls can do for him by being with him. We cannot, finally, regard Jesus as a moral or religious reformer, gathering followers ready and able to sign on for a project of changing things for the better. The point is that Jesus is with them. What matters is his healing, saving, life-giving presence, Jesus as Immanuel: God with us, where God for too long has been, to all appearances, absent. The disciples, the twelve he calls to symbolize the tribes of Israel, are called, not because of anything of value they can do, but to represent the fact that God at last is there on the ground, taking his people's part. To hear this call is to be invited into God's presence, the place God is at work in the world. The people he calls might misunderstand him, desert him, even get in his way, but he is there with them – for them – no matter what.

Today we hear and answer Jesus' call to follow him, repenting and believing the good news, when we bear witness to his presence; the savior of all here with us, doing his work of saving people. Elisaveta Skobstova was a Russian intellectual and revolutionary. Elisaveta -- Liza -- was raised in the Orthodox Church, but in her teens her acute sense of the injustice and suffering of the world led her to atheism. As a young woman, she joined the Bolsheviks and engaged in revolutionary activity but in time she became convinced that Christ, not political theories, was the only hope of the oppressed and suffering masses. After the October 1917 revolution she barely avoided summary execution in St. Petersburg. She fled Russia and eventually made it to Paris with her husband and two daughters. In the harsh winter of 1926 the impoverished émigré family came down with influenza. The youngest child, five-year old Anastasia, got sicker and sicker, becoming thinner each day. She was diagnosed with meningitis. Liza stayed with her daughter day and night in the hospital as the child wasted away but, after a month-long vigil, the child died. All but broken with grief, she came to know Jesus, the suffering Savior, beside her in her anguish. Afterwards, she wrote:

Into the black, yawning grave fly all hopes, plans, habits, calculations, and – above all – meaning: the meaning of life. Meaning has lost its meaning, and another incomprehensible Meaning has caused wings to grow on one's back ...and I think that anyone who has had this experience of eternity, if only once; who has understood the way he is going, if only once; who has seen the One who goes before him, if only once -- such a person will find it hard to turn aside from this path: to him all comfort will seem ephemeral, all treasures valueless, all companions unnecessary, if among them he fails to see the One Companion, carrying his cross.

Every person of faith faces the ancient question why, if there is a God who is so good and so powerful, there is yet such evil in

this world, such suffering. Philosophical and theological explanations run out, and we are left with no answer other than to point to Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, the crucified Savior, and to say that God suffers with those who suffer, that God takes on himself the evil of the world. In the Talmud, Rabbi ben Levi says: *Where is the Messiah? Sitting at the gate of the city among the poor, covered in sores.*

This is a great truth but left at that it is misleading. For we cannot suppose that it is our task simply to see God at work and talk about it. We are called to be where God in Christ works, and to do so by sharing in what he does, making his work our own. Look again to the witness of Jesus' disciple Liza Skobstova: she heard the call to witness Christ's saving work as a call to action. She devoted the rest of her life, after the death of her child, to caring for the needs of the homeless, the sick and the hungry in Paris, especially those of the Russian émigré community. She became a nun, took the name Maria, and started a shelter that welcomed all comers, offering bodily sustenance, worship in the Orthodox manner, and whatever else was needed. The tireless, more than slightly disreputable cigarette-smoking Russian nun was a fixture in 1930's Paris, trying to be anywhere she saw human need, anywhere she could bear witness to the life-giving Christ by acting on his behalf. She became known as Mother Maria of Paris. When the Second World War began, she refused the opportunity to leave the country. She stayed, and carried on her work during the Nazi occupation. Beginning in 1942, when the Nazis began to deport Jews, she readily issued spurious baptismal certificates – against the opposition of the Church authorities -- and recorded them in the parish register in the hope that this would save them from the Gestapo. She always said that if the Gestapo arrived, seeking Jews, she would show them her icon of the Mother of God. She wrote: *“About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says ‘I’: ‘I was hungry and thirsty, I was sick and in prison.’ To think that he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need...I always knew it, but now it has somehow penetrated my sinews. It fills me with awe.”*

Finally, in 1943, she and her colleagues were arrested. She was sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Many survivors testified after the war to her many acts of generosity and encouragement to others, one said that amid the horrors of the camp “she radiated the peace of God and communicated it to us.” She was murdered on Good Friday, 1945. An unsubstantiated, but completely plausible, report indicates that she contrived to take the place of a frantic inmate scheduled for death, dying in her place. As she was sent to crematorium, the guns of the approaching Red Army were audible in the distance.

Christ was present to the hungry, the frightened, the dying wherever Maria for his sake was there for them.

Jesus suffered and died for us. We should hear this not as *“instead of us,”* for it is all too clear that we go on suffering and dying, but as *“on our behalf.”* Her suffered not to exempt us from suffering, but that our suffering might be like his, a redeeming suffering of self-giving love. In Jesus we have not substitution, but saving companionship. (Fr. Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 109) Our mission is to hear and heed his call, to accept his companionship on our way and offer it to others, casting the net of God's love wide and deep. *Amen.*

