

Sermon, the Rev. Peggy Tuttle

January 27, 2008

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany

A game warden noticed how a particular fellow named Sam consistently caught more fish than anyone else. Whereas the other guys would only catch three or four fish a day, Sam would come in from the lake with a boat full of fish. Stringer after stringer was packed with freshly caught trout. The warden, curious, asked Sam his secret. The successful fisherman invited the game warden to accompany him and observe.

So the next morning, the two met at the dock and took off in Sam's boat. When they got to the middle of the lake, Sam stopped the boat, and the warden sat back to see how it was done.

Sam's approach was simple: He took out a stick of dynamite, lit it, and threw it into the air. The explosion rocked the lake with such a force that dead fish immediately began to surface. Sam took out a net and started scooping them up.

Well, you can imagine the reaction of the game warden. When he recovered from the shock of it all, he began yelling at Sam, "You can't do this! I'll put you in jail, buddy! You will be paying every fine there is in the book!"

Sam, meanwhile, set his net down and took out another stick of dynamite. He lit it and tossed it in the lap of the game warden with these words: "Are you going to sit there all day complaining, or are you going to fish?"

The Psalmist writes, "Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar." This is a God who is near, who knows my every move, who knows what I think and believe; even before I

speak the words, He knows what is on my lips.

Even distance does not separate us from the Lord, for there is no place, however distant, that God has not created. To God, darkness and light are the same. God is everywhere. God's love is ever-present. And He will not let any one of us go.

Because God singled out the people of Israel from all the families of the earth, they were God's people. The Lord showed the Israelites particular favor through their deliverance from Egypt, but they turned away from God. They made false agreements and began adopting the customs of surrounding peoples.

Through the Prophet Amos, God made the truth known. The lion roared to cause terror for everyone. God spoke to reveal the meaning of that roar. Amos had no choice but to proclaim it to the people.

As for the Apostle Paul, he, too, has a word of warning for the people in the Church in Corinth. There is division among the people. There are those who feel a deep loyalty to Paul while others want to follow the eloquent Apollos. These factions are fighting and dividing the church. For Paul, it doesn't matter how many different groups there are, this is no place for division.

Paul's words are calling out to us today. Our own church is divided, the Anglican Communion is divided and there is division over religion in our country and in the world. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

There is only one discipleship—a baptism in the name of Christ.

As you recall, Jesus' public ministry begins after his baptism by John in the River Jordan. Jesus is baptized; from there he goes into the wilderness where he is tempted but he passes the tests of temptations and leaves Nazareth to make his home in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. That's where we find him in today's Gospel lesson.

As he walks down the beach he sees fishermen.

“Follow me,” Jesus says. And they do. Simon, who is later called Peter, and Andrew his brother, leave their nets and follow him. Then Jesus sees two other brothers, James and John and he calls them and they immediately drop what they are doing and follow Jesus.

They leave behind their boats but not the desire to seek the unknown of the sea. They leave behind their fishing nets but not the challenge of a risky business. They leave behind the crashing of waves, but not the ebb and flow of the water’s rocking rhythm.

What are they thinking, these fishermen, Simon and Peter?! Isn’t it risky enough to fish for a living? To contend with the weather, the seasons, the market prices for fish, the vagaries of the market which dictate which fish is the gourmet fish for today? Is it tuna, or mahi-mahi or shark, or tilapia, or salmon, or trout or walleye or Coho? (I know, I know, you purists out there are saying, “Hey, she’s mixing fresh water fish with salt water fish with farmed fish and Pacific Ocean fish with fish from the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Lakes. Well, I’m trying to make a point. Fishing for a living is quite different from the fishing people do for fun.)

Professional and commercial fishing is a dangerous business. Whether you take a cod boat out of Gloucester, Mass or a guided sports fishing boat from Hawaii, it is an unpredictable business.

Professional fishermen are hearty. They are risk takers. They depend on the unknown and risk all they have for the sake of catching fish. Enough fish, the right kind of fish, healthy fish, fish that can last until they get back to port.

Maybe that’s why Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John. Jesus

knew these men were hardy and capable. These were men who knew patience as they waited, yet, could spring into action when needed.

In the movie, “The Perfect Storm,” Billy Tyne is the captain of a fishing boat. He is highly competitive and has been badly stung by a string of poor outings. His crew is hardly back in port when he tells them he’s going out again, even though it’s October and the weather can turn ugly. It is 1991, and the “Andrea Gail” leaves Gloucester, Mass. and heads for the fishing grounds of the North Atlantic. Five crewman join him: young Bobby, newly in love; Murph, a devoted father recently divorced; Sully, a guy Murph despises; Buggy, who’s finally met a woman who likes him; and Alfred, a quiet Jamaican. They catch little, so they sail east. Two weeks later, an event takes place that had never occurred previously in recorded history. A confluence of weather conditions combines to form a killer storm in the North Atlantic. Tyne ignores the storm warnings behind him. Finally, the fish bite, but the ice machine fails. Should they head home through the storm of the century, or wait it out and lose their catch? And Billy Tyne’s sword-fishing boat is caught in this Perfect Storm.

Fearful, their women waited. Billy and his crew were hearty men, men of brute strength. The crew was committed to their captain and the people back home whom they loved.

They were professional fishermen. These were the kinds of men Jesus called as his disciples:

- Men who knew how to combat the perils of the sea, the changing winds and roiling seas.
- Men who could change course if needed.
- Men who had been tried.

- Men who knew failure and men who knew success.

Jesus called fishermen because what lay ahead of them was going to be rough waters, unpredictable winds and difficult sailing. They would be faced with life threatening choices and Jesus knew they had to be strong of character and body. And they were.

Living or visiting here in paradise, as these islands are called, it may difficult to imagine the kinds of storms some sea going vessels contend with but you know the stories of sunken ships, ships lost in storms and in calm weather; people whose lives have been lost battling unpredictable waters.

What strikes me most about the Gospel of Matthew is that he writes, “Immediately they left”. They left whatever it was they were doing and they followed him. And traveling with them, Jesus proclaimed the Good News of the Gospels.

I don’t mean the Pollyanna kind of good news. I am not here to tell you that once you accept the life of an apostle, a follower of Jesus, a proclaimer of the Gospel, that all will be well. Like the disciples, the fishermen Jesus called, there will be storms to contend with. There will be moments of indecision, of doubt and even fear. But we are not alone and we can go knowing our guide and teacher is God in Christ who passionately searches us out to know us and comes to know us in order to love and lead us. Faithfully, let us follow.