

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

January 25, 2009

Epiphany 3B 2009

In the Name of our one living God who knows our ways and seeks us out:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We all know about getting into school or applying for a job. We are the petitioners. We take tests, gather our records, write resumes, and submit letters of recommendation. If our paperwork passes muster, we go for interviews. The school or the boss then will look over the various candidates and select those admitted from those who applied. That's the way the world works. That's the way, it seems, the world has always worked. We are the petitioners; we are the ones vulnerable to rejection. The school or the employer has all the power.

But if the Bible is to be believed, that is not how God works! It is God who seeks us out for God's own purposes. It is God who sees in us something we often fail to see in ourselves that will suit God's intentions just fine. It is God who calls us. It is up to us to say "Yes" to God's call. It is God who is willing to be vulnerable to rejection.

This week's lessons are again stories about calls and discipleship. Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is the story of Jonah – you know the guy whose story makes me still look at our mellow humpback whales with some apprehension. I would encourage to read the whole story – it's only 3 ½ pages long in my bible – and it is kind of a satire on the stories of the prophets of old. It was written at a time following the end of the Babylonian captivity when many of Israel's religious and political leaders felt themselves superior to their neighbors and sought to exclude the neighbor by separating themselves as much as possible.

Jonah is called by God to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to the East to pass God's judgment on its wickedness and warn them that it would be destroyed by God unless they repent. Jonah turns out to be a most unwilling prophet of God. He is appalled that God would send him to warn these wicked Gentile enemies of his people. He turns and runs to the ends of the earth in the other direction, to Tarshich. We all know the story of the whale that swallowed Jonah and deposited him on Nineveh's doorstep. Jonah declares God's judgment to Nineveh and, wouldn't you know it, the king believes it and commands that all should turn from their wicked ways and don the sackcloth and ashes of repentance.

Well, wouldn't you know it, God saw their repentance, God changed God's mind about the calamity he would bring upon them. Now this angered Jonah no end. How dare God spare the lives of the repentant pagans when he preached the same words to his own people prior to their conquest since they did not heed God's warnings. When Jonah later complains about God destroying a bush that gave him shade, God asks Jonah, "You are concerned about a bush for which you did not labor and grow; should I not be concerned about a great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons?"

God called the uncooperative and self-righteous Jonah to give a new lesson to God's people. Not only is he their God, but he is the Creator of all and loves and cares for all his people. God decides what God is going to do and God has the right to change his mind. This is a good lesson to read when we are going to baptize a baby who will live in a period of even greater and faster change than we have experienced. He will face many new situations and will be called upon to discern God's will in a different world and how to respond in new situations with new knowledge.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus takes the initiative and calls his first four disciples: Simon and his brother Andrew who were casting their nets. “Follow me,” said Jesus,” “and I will make you fish for people.” We don’t know what they understood, but they immediately left their nets and followed him. Later he calls to James and John, sons of Zebedee, as they were mending their nets. They immediately left their father in the boat and followed him. They were unlikely choices and we don’t know what Jesus saw in them. Simple fishermen, they wouldn’t be any rabbi’s first picks; but pick them Jesus did. They may not have been learned men, but they had three characteristics that are essential for disciples: trust, curiosity and a willingness to follow. We will soon pray for these qualities to be found in young Ryan James Makana’akua Guest.

Mark says that they immediately responded to Jesus’ call, left their old lives and previous attachments and followed him. Fortunately for most of us, God is also patient and persistent! It takes most of us a while to hear our call and even longer to discern what it is. We can even spend our lives saying no to it, but as Paige Bigelow – a friend and one of the first women ordained as a priest told me – we never find complete happiness until we say “Yes”.

Today, we are going to make a new disciple out of little Ryan James Makana’akua Guest. His parents are giving him a great gift – a community in which he can grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord – and an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon him as we make him part of the Body of Christ. We don’t know what his call will be or where it will lead him. If he follows Jesus, I cannot guarantee him an easy life but I can guarantee him an interesting and happy one that leads to the joy of eternal life in the living Christ.

So let’s go make a new Christian!