

### **3 EPIPHANY JANUARY 23, 2011 CYCLE "A"**

#### **TITLE: JESUS PROCLAIMED THE GOOD NEWS OF THE KINGDOM**

**READINGS: Isa. 9:1-4, Ps. 27:1,4-9, 1Cor.1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-23**

I grew up across the street from the Wilburn family. The mother's name was Levida. She was a very no nonsense, rather rustic lady who would call her children home by walking out on her front porch and whistling very loudly. Lavidia's kids would drop everything and come running no matter how far they were from home. Sometimes they came from all the way across our town for they knew her whistle and knew their mom meant business. We would never accuse Jesus of exercising authoritative, dominant power and control, but it is rather strange for us to see the disciples suddenly walking away from their livelihood and wandering off with a relative stranger just because he said "Follow me." But that's the way it appears to be in today's Gospel reading. Jesus is beginning his public ministry and following the imprisonment of John the Baptist, he proclaims the Good News of his Kingdom with "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matt.1:17. He then calls four fishermen toiling at their nets, "Follow me," he says, "and I will make you fish for people." And "Immediately," Matthew tells us, "they left their nets and followed him." Matt.1:19-20. From that moment the world of Peter, Andrew, James and John was turned upside down.

It is difficult for us to know what happened with those first disciples, but we do know they had an encounter with Jesus. In that encounter something happened to change their lives and not only change their lives but change their vocations as well. We, too, have had an encounter with Jesus and we, in so many different ways and through others in our lives, continue to have encounters with him. Our church, of course, can be and certainly should be a place where people encounter Jesus. I would never want Bethany to be just another social organization, a club, a fraternity or place of entertainment. These are good for us, but our church must be something different. We want Bethany to be a place where people meet God. We should have a very significant encounter with our God each time we come into his house to worship him.

The testimony of both the Old and New Testaments witness to the life, the ministry, the impact of Jesus Christ. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light," says Isaiah as Matthew quotes him in our Gospel today, "and for those who sit in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." Matt.1:16. The ministry of the early church also attests the same, and we must realize that this is not dead

history. It is as living and vital today as it ever was in those earliest days of our church, continually witnessing what God can do in our individual lives. God is here, present today waiting to come into our lives and to make us what he wants us to be. We should look forward to coming into this church each week expecting a miracle, expecting God to do great things in our lives. Just as the first disciples encountered Jesus and it totally changed their lives, we, too, should pray and expect that very thing to happen to us.

But nothing happens without our response. The disciples responded to the call of Jesus. As Matthew points out they did so immediately. They didn't procrastinate nor did they make excuses. Jesus said, "Follow me," and they did just that, they followed him. They had to have been convinced that here was their Messiah, here was he who Isaiah had said, "A child has been born for us, a Son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Isa.9:6. And if we are to respond to our calling as our four disciples today, we must acknowledge that God has called us, each one of us individually just as he called Peter, Andrew, James and John.

The result of that call on us depends on what we do with it. We can simply belong to a church or we can be active, believing members. The disciples acted. There is a great difference between believing in God's purpose in the world and seeking to be a part of achieving that purpose. Many of you may remember Andrew Young. He was one of our most visible African-American leaders. He is a former congressman, former ambassador to the United Nations and former mayor of Atlanta, Georgia. He is an ordained minister. One day Andrew Young's daughter came home from college. She said to him, "Daddy, I heard a missionary talking about ministry in Uganda, and I've done a lot of praying about this, and I think God wants me to take a year and go to Uganda as a missionary." "Well, honey," her father replied, "You know that's all well and good, but there's a lot of poor people right here in Atlanta that need you." She said, "Daddy, I know that, but I really believe that God is calling me to Uganda." "Honey, it's dangerous over there in Uganda," Andrew Young pleaded, "you could get hurt." "I know that Daddy," she said, "but I could also get hurt right here." He said, "But honey you could be killed there." "Daddy, I could be killed at any time, anywhere. I really believe that God is calling me to go to Uganda," she said. Andrew Young thought and prayed about it, and finally he gave her his blessing. "When my daughter walked onto that airplane," he said later, "I realized that in baptizing her and raising her, what I said I wanted most for her was that she would become a respectable Christian. But I wasn't prepared for her to become a real one!" George Gallup calls it the difference between being a "believing" church member and a "belonging" church member.

Anybody can belong to a church. But believing in God's purpose in the world and seeking to be a part of achieving that purpose is different.

We should ask ourselves: am I a believer, or simply a believer? Am I satisfied with being a respectable Christian or am I a real one? Have I truly heard the call of Jesus? Have I really responded to my call? Peter, Andrew, James and John did. Peter became the leader of the early church. Andrew is often praised as the first evangelist. John, son of thunder, becomes John the beloved disciple, writing his Gospel, three letters and the Book of Revelation on the isle of Patmos. John's brother James is less prominent in the Biblical record. According to Acts, however, James was beheaded for his faith by Herod Agrippa. This is the only account of one of Jesus' twelve Apostles being martyred for his faith.

These disciples were believers, not merely believers. They didn't settle for being respectable Christians; they were real ones. They heard the call of Jesus and responded to him. They encountered him and it changed their lives. May we, too, have our lives changed through our encounters with Jesus. **Amen**

**Pastor Barney**