

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, January 21, 2018.

Those of us who are regular worshippers at St. Christopher's are Insert People. Each week we have an insert that contains the Prayer for the Day, a Psalm, and lessons from the Old Testament, the Epistles, and the Gospels. Almost without fail, this prayer and these lessons fill four pages. Today, though, everything is shorter. We even have a blank page.

Were the editors tired? Or did the editors feel we needed a break? Or, in the shortened lessons, were the editors trying to give us a message? I think the latter. I think that it was time to focus on the basics. It's always a good thing, from time to time, to revisit what is essential.

Take the Collect, for example. It is designed to pull together the lessons. The focus today is "the call of our Savior Jesus Christ." It takes for granted that Jesus is a Savior and that he wants us – those who are saved - to proclaim this salvation to all people. Pretty straight forward. There is no debate about whether God exists, whether there was something special about Jesus, and whether there is a responsibility on those of us who believe in his specialness.

We then proceed to four passages which we can accurately call "no nonsense" passages.

Remember that the Lord came to Jonah two times. Today's lesson is about the second time (**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**). The first time, God wanted Jonah to do the same thing, namely to warn the people that they best shape up. But Jonah wasn't ready. So God came a second time. And you get the feeling that there won't be a third time. You and I know this feeling. This time Jonah obeys, the people "turn from their evil ways," and God responds favorably. What more needs to be said?

In his First Letter to the Corinthians (**I Corinthians 7:29-31**), Paul speaks plainly. No more fooling around. "The appointed time has grown short." God wants us to behave more responsibly, and He wants to do so before "this world passes away." If we know what is good us, we will shape up. We know what God expects. We know that if we really want to meet that expectation, we can do a much better job than we're doing now. Time is short. Get with the program. "That's my message," says Paul, "and I'm sticking to it. And you also had better stick to it." Again, no nonsense. No need to say more.

In the passage from Mark (**Mark 1:14-20**), Jesus picks up where John the Baptist left off. Indeed, Jesus reinforces the message of John. “The time is fulfilled,” Jesus says. “The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Jesus then begins to recruit his disciples. As far as we know, Jesus doesn’t say, “Think about it. I’ll be back in six months and see how you’re feeling about things.” No, Jesus acts as if there is no tomorrow. He has a big message. He is a big message. He understands himself as the fulfillment of the hope his people have had for centuries. No more fooling around. “The time is here,” he says. “I need your help, Simon and Andrew. I need your help too, James and John. We’ve got a message to deliver. No more waiting. No more contemplation. No more wondering if and when the Messiah will come. I am he, and I am here. Let’s do it.”

The fourth passage, Psalm 62 (**Psalm 62:6-14**), reminds us of the wait. “For God alone my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in him.” The editors, I believe, want to underscore just how deep the wait is, and then remind us that, in Christ, that wait is answered. The more we remember where we came from, the more we can rejoice in where we’re going.

So, is there a method in the madness of our insert editors? I think so. And we know this technique. We use this technique with our children and with our parents, with our employees and our bosses, with our friends and strangers. Sometimes the less said, the better. It’s more effective. It’s more memorable. It’s more to the point.

Remember that what three of our four passages have in common is that “We know what we should be doing. Let’s do it.” Enough talk. Enough verses. God is calling us. He wants an answer. He wants our help. Let’s do it.”

Now, having said this, having pointed out that God’s patience might have its limits, we must remember that God’s patience runs deeper than ours. We can’t judge God’s impatience by our impatience. We give up on people much quicker than God does. That doesn’t mean that God’s patience is unlimited. It means simply that we need to be really thankful for all the chances – not just the first or second or third or fourth – but all the chances that God gives us to acknowledge and respond to His blessings.

One of those blessings, if not the biggest one, is forgiveness. And the acceptance of that forgiveness is one of our greatest challenges.

Look again at the Jonah passage. Given a second chance, Jonah – and I’m reading from the insert here – “set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.” This is another way of saying that Jonah accepted God’s forgiveness – “the word of the Lord” - for having not warned the people the first time around.

If Jonah didn’t believe in the forgiving power of God, Jonah might have reacted very differently when God approached him a second time. He might have said, “You’ve got to be kidding. I didn’t respond the first time; what makes you think I’ll respond this time? And what makes you think I’m worthy of a second chance. No, this must be a trick. I’m not buying it, so forget about me warning the people.”

But this is not how Jonah responded. The second time around, he did believe. He did accept. He did move on. And, in doing so, he set an example for us. God’s forgiveness is deep. Don’t underestimate it. Don’t shortchange it. And don’t judge God’s forgiveness by what we would do. To do so would be the height of arrogance on our part. And it’s never a good idea to be arrogant with God.

If God wants to forgive, He will do so. This in itself is a blessing. And once we can accept that blessing and give thanks for that blessing, we position ourselves to be fishers of people. In other words, when it comes to introducing people to Christ, our gratitude for being forgiven is really inviting, perhaps persuasive. Chances are that the person to whom we are speaking feels a need for forgiveness. That need is universal. At some point, we were there. We know the feeling. And because we know the feeling, “Thank you, Lord” ought to be part of our fishing gear.

The passage from Mark’s gospel notes the calling of Simon and Andrew and of James and John, but does not say what equipment these brand new disciples should take as they “fish for people.” I think it’s fair to say that what Jesus had in mind for them, and what God has in mind for you and me, is a profound gratitude for being forgiven. This sense of a new chance is what drives us. And this sense of a new chance is what will interest others.

This is one of those essential ingredients, one of the basics, in the Christian Faith. It’s not complicated. Three words only. “Thank you, Lord.”

No need to say more. Amen.

