



We Are Called
January 26th, 2020
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta
Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

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The Collect

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*



First Reading *Isaiah 9:1-4*

There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Gospel *Matthew 3:13-17*

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.



What does it look like to be called?

Perhaps you have lived an answer to that question for yourself at some time or another. A faint tug on your heart, a nudge in one direction over another. Maybe you have sensed the life of the divine brush over your own, and you have made a decisive change as a consequence.

That was certainly true of my sense of call to this parish. I was sitting in our living room in San Diego, ensconced in my charming parish community just a few blocks from the glorious beauty of the Pacific Ocean, when unbeknownst to me God was planting a seed. I had just finished reading the parish profile. I'd read it very carefully, page by page, lingering here and there to let a word or a phrase sink in. And then, I put it down on the seat next to me, looked out at the window and said to myself, "I think they're talking about me". It was a stupendous thing to think at the time, but true in the end. God had tugged the fishing line again.



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No doubt, it would have been a lot simpler just to have called up the senior warden and let him know, but that isn't how call works is it. The seed of our calling has to grow, and the caller and the called have to arrive in the middle of somewhere new together. And that requires the willingness to move out from the familiarity of now.

That was certainly the spirit of the call of Simon Peter and Andrew that we hear in Matthew's gospel this morning: 'follow me', Jesus asks, and they do so immediately. No question of where or how, or even why. They just go. For at the heart of it all was not what they were able to know about the content of the call, but the nature of the caller, Jesus. The same Jesus who asks us to let go of our own grip on today, so that we might take hold of the promise of tomorrow.



As I have been listening and reading this month to the journey of faith that we have traveled as a church these past 117 years, I have been struck by how much of the call that All Saints' has heard has been lived out precisely that way. From our vantage point, in hindsight, the path looks clear, consistent, even, with what had preceded it. Yet at times, it must have felt like a seismic movement away from the familiar in order to discover the new.

Think back to Matthew Warren, who as rector here in the 1940's, stepped out from the familiar as the only one of all of the clergy leading white churches in Atlanta at the time to speak up against the poll tax - the \$3 fee charged to those who wished to vote in the Democratic Primary that year - because in his mind it served to exclude people of color. A singular act of courage in 1945.



Hard to know where that might have lead at the time, but a decade later, Warren's bravery paved a way for Milton Wood, who succeeded him as rector and who joined half a dozen churches' senior pastors to organize the Minister's Manifesto, a small yet important step along the way to desegregation. Alongside Wood as associate and fellow signatory of the Manifesto was Frank Ross, who in the 1960's and 70's set this place alight with his straight line style of preaching, unrelentingly inviting this parish to wrestle with the questions of the day.

Frank could never have seen the AIDS crisis coming, yet it was his prophetic witness in this place that prepared the ground for Harry Pritchett's ministry here as rector that saw All Saints' become a place of sanctuary for those looking for a church that would receive them as they mourned loved ones they had lost to AIDS. And without Harry's commitment to loving the neighbors of this city All Saints' encountered in those times, Geoffrey's bold leadership that enabled this community to embrace marriage equality and the ordained leadership of all God's people no matter who they love would not have succeeded quite as fully as it did.



The pattern of our history is clear. Call is not about the clarity we have today; it is about trusting in the faithfulness of the one who calls us into tomorrow, and then having the confidence in faith to step out, even in the absence of directions for the road ahead. It is about trusting that in following Jesus our faith will actually take us somewhere.

What, then, might we say the call is for All Saint's today? It is that we should have the courage to step forward into the future, willing to engage one another in honesty and love, to inspire one another to lead lives that are consequential for the welfare of this city, whether that be a life that impacts a thousand others, or just the one sitting next to you now. It is that we should celebrate that our heritage as a church is one that has lived into the words that Jesus cites from Isaiah in our gospel reading this morning, that *"for those who sat in the...shadow of death light has dawned...for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* The kingdom where injustice is turned to justice; despair to hope; hatred to love; judgement to grace.



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That is the quality of our call. That is the nature of the One who calls us. As we discern our future in this place, as the saints of this block let us also be willing to let go of the familiar in order to discover the new. Now is the time for us to look out more than look in. Now is the time for us to see our mission and purpose as a church to be people who will embody the faith we proclaim in this place through our lives beyond it. Now is the time for us to listen deeply and lovingly and with the knowledge of grace in our hearts to those who sit in darkness all around us.

I believe that we are called in this time in our history, when it is so easy to create enmity between our fellow human beings, to be bridge-builders for God's kingdom of reconciliation and love. Yet, to do so we must be prepared to look at ourselves, our legacies, our life's journeys, with honesty.



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If we are going to learn how to build bridges of hope and reconciliation in this city, then we will have to confront our past and the legacy of slavery, and Jim Crow, of a segregated South not only for the sake of ourselves but because we still live in a segregated world.

If we are to commit anew to the ways of God's kingdom of peace and justice for all people, then we will have to confront a status quo where millions live in abject poverty.

If we are going to learn to how to follow Christ here, in a Midtown that is enjoying such a rich renaissance all around us, then we will also have to ask what it means to be Christian in a metropolitan Atlanta that is so desperately short of affordable housing, where children struggle to gain access to quality healthcare and education, where people are locked into cycles of poverty and exclusion while so many of us live lives of incredible comfort and ease.



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Whatever we do together, whatever the legacy is that we will build on this block, I know that it will be the work of profoundly loving and giving lives. You are an extraordinary parish, a gift of love for the lives of so many, and yet we are called to more. We are called by a power beyond our telling, a life-giving and liberating love that is working God's purpose out even in us.

We have all that we need. We are called.