

Today is the third Sunday after Epiphany and despite what you see streaming through these beautiful windows, there will be more darkness today than light. The Annual Sun Graph for Wilmington tells me that there are only nine hours and twenty-three minutes of daylight today and over eleven hours of darkness. For the past few weeks it seems that I get out of bed in the dark and every evening I travel home from work in the dark. But as my wife likes to remind me, every day there's a bit more light in my day: the sun rises a minute earlier each morning and sets a minute or two later each night. And with that fact firmly in mind, I look forward to tomorrow with a sense of anticipation and hope.

But I do so knowing that it's not just the position of the earth's axis towards the sun that contributes to our darkness. There's the hazarai that is life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; that metaphorical darkness that we find ourselves in most every day, regardless of the sun's position.

It's the constant drumbeat of angry political news emanating from Washington each day. The natural worldwide catastrophes that result when we fail to respect the power of nature. Darkness is at the heart of our lack of support for protecting the most vulnerable among us; we see it in gun violence, racism, poverty, and inequality. In our focus on human differences that separate us rather than celebrate our common values.

We live in a time of disconnection with each other yet we hear God's voice calling us to banish the darkness and bring the light of hope and love into these broken times. The church is being called. THIS church is being called. We as Christians are called.

As I thought about Mark's gospel reading this week I keep returning to this concept of being called to a life mission or spiritual undertaking that adds just a trace of light in this world of darkness. I also had to ask myself how I should respond if that call arrives; if one day some cosmic or spiritual phone rings inside my head calling me to move in a certain direction. Will I listen? And if I do, what am I willing to leave behind?

For a fortunate few, a personal calling, a connection to a life mission, comes at an early age. Mozart starting writing music when he was five. Enrico Fermi was a mathematics and physics prodigy at the age ten. Picasso was admitted to the prestigious Barcelona Art School at age 14. The light that sprang from each of these individuals is evident today in ways that make our lives more beautiful and more interesting.

For others, that call may come much later in life, or maybe it's not quite so clear. It may even be ignored because of the material demands of the world in which we live.

Mark's Gospel tells us the story of Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John in Galilee to fish for people. The reading is matter of fact. There are no miracles to behold and not much drama. These four don't need much convincing. They're called. They drop everything. They follow Christ.

But why these four guys and why the other eight? What does it mean to be called by Christ anyway? Are we called? And if we are, what is this calling telling us about the kind of life that God wants us to lead? How will our calling contribute to bringing light into this world?

The passage from Mark is relatively short and there's not much of a message that will carry you through the week. Jesus issues an invitation – a kind of job offer – that is immediately embraced by these four fishermen.

Picture this: Simon and Andrew own their fishing boat, their fishing gear and most likely have people who depend upon their labor. They've been working as fisherman day after day after day. But without question, they abandon all that was precious in this world and follow Christ. James and John abandon not only their boat, but also their father, who has raised and protected them from infancy. All four abandon what was safe and predictable to enter a life that would take them places they could never imagine.

Jesus called twelve to follow as disciples. We have a rough understanding of how each of the twelve had made their way in the world before meeting Jesus: there were about seven fishermen, there was a tax collector, a zealot, and several tradesmen. The composite profile of the chosen twelve was really pretty humble. There were no Pharisees, no learned elders, or wealthy business types. No leaders who would lend an imprimatur of respectability and believability to Christ's mission.

There were no background checks, no interview questions, no IQ tests, or financial disclosure forms to complete. But most important, there was NO negotiation on the terms of employment.

Why does Jesus call these men and not twelve others? We don't know and the gospel reading doesn't say. But I have to believe that Jesus sees something in each of them that affirms his conviction that these are the ones who he can trust to continue his work on earth after he is gone. These are ordinary people, like you and me, who, with God's help, will be called upon to do what is extraordinary.

Like us, they were imperfect instruments, tools really, to accomplish God's purpose. Many times the twelve misunderstood the teachings of Jesus; at times they hesitated to follow him; Peter denied him three times, and Judas ultimately betrayed him.

But Jesus knew all of this would ultimately come to pass and settled for what was available. After all, it's a poor carpenter who blames his tools. God deliberately used these humble tools to build a glorious kingdom. He did so because of his need to demonstrate to us that all that would come to be, and all that would be accomplished must be attributed to him and NOT to the cleverness of men.

Therein is the good news in this lesson: God specializes in using people who don't seem fit for the job. The reason may be this: When God does something that is truly profound through such an inadequate individual; both the individual and those who witness that action cannot fail to recognize God's grace. God wishes to show a humanity lost in darkness that even the least among us ARE capable of shedding light on seemingly hopeless situations. All of us are capable of being extraordinary in God's eyes.

So yes, we ARE called – we're called every day. We are given an example to guide our relationship to God and are called to simply live and connect with each other according to Christ's teachings.

But how many of us are willing to accept this calling and walk away from a life of comfort and predictability into one that is fraught with personal risk and danger. How many of us are willing to follow this preacher into an unknown future...NOW. It's a pretty high bar set by the disciples and I suspect not too many of us are willing to accept these terms.

But maybe calling to discipleship is different. Maybe our calling takes us in another direction that serves God and serves to bring light into this darkened world. I believe God is calling us to

follow the teachings of Christ, but he isn't necessarily telling us that there is only one path. Yes, God calls men and women to be priests and workers within the church structure, missionaries who work in this and other developing countries to improve living conditions, population health, and connections that move a society in a positive direction.

But God's call isn't always so narrow. God calls every one of us, but I feel his terms are a bit more general. We answer God's calling when we work on our farms, when we provide nursing care in hospitals or medical offices; when we work in law offices; when we teach in schools, colleges and universities; when we pursue careers in business, in construction, art, in counseling or government work.

David J. Lose a senior Lutheran pastor from Minneapolis explains the nature of this general calling when he writes,

"We can follow Jesus in all of these different situations and circumstances precisely by trying to imitate him – by trying to treat others with the same regard, love and patience that he did, including all manner of people, but especially those who are overlooked by society. This is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian: to try to live and treat others as Jesus did, by embracing the values of inclusiveness, love, forgiveness, and healing that he radiated in word and deed."

Not all of us are called to leave our boats and nets, our family and our homes. Most of us are called to stay right where we are. But one scholar I read suggested this one caveat: "We are not called to SOMETHING such as agriculture, the law, healthcare, or politics. Nor are we called SOMEWHERE such as Boston, Paris, or the Deerfield Valley. We are called to SOMEONE: the living Christ."

God knows who we are. God knows the gifts and abilities we have. I believe that God knows what is good for our soul and would never call on us to turn our backs on that goodness. I don't think God is asking us to become like someone else, some ideal we carry in our heads that fits our definition of what it means to be a "fisher of men." After all, this is not holy conscription.

I think God is calling us to stop working for ourselves and to start working on bringing some small amount of brightness into this darkened world. We're called to connection with one another. We're called to peace. To fellowship. To eternal life. To suffering and to service. We're called to glorify God.

That spiritual phone is calling on us everyday to bring his light into this world of constant darkness. Pray that we find the strength and compassion within ourselves to undertake what it is calling us to do.

Amen.