

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, 1/21/2018, SERIES B
PRINCE OF PEACE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN, POLAND
Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

So, what's your faith story? What could you share with someone else about your faith if they asked you about Jesus? How would you invite someone else into a deeper relationship with Jesus?

I know, last week I mentioned that I like to end my sermons with questions for you to think about during the week. It's a way to help prepare for those moments when someone might just ask you a faith-based questions. But today, I'm starting out with questions. Actually, my questions last Sunday about encountering God's power, purpose and presence are not so different from these. They are all questions about our own faith stories.

Our gospel reading for today tells us how Jesus encountered his first disciples. He saw them, and he called them. By the power of his voice, he instilled them with his purpose, and brought them his presence. When Jesus does it, it looks so easy.

You can just hear the disciples talking about their faith stories later in life. "Jesus just called out to us, and we knew we needed to go with him. From that point on we learned about reaching out to others and inviting them to be part of Jesus' movement. It was an awesome moment."

I've been thinking about faith stories, lately. I've been thinking about how rare it is to have someone deliberately talk about something in his or her faith life when we gather on Sundays, or for meetings or fellowship times. I'm just as guilty as anyone else in not sharing.

Don't get me wrong. It's not bad to be talking about basketball, or the symphony, or a lecture, or whatever else we may have just experienced as we gather for worship. It's just that I've noticed that seems to be all we talk about. And I got to thinking some more-- I know that's dangerous, me thinking, -- but I wondered, if someone came here hoping to hear about God, what would they hear? Oh, we do a great job talking about God in worship, and that's to be expected. But what about our hallway conversations? Would a person hear us talking about faith?

Now, that might make some folks a bit nervous -- what? Talk about faith? Isn't that the pastors' job? Yes, but it not just our job. It's everyone's job.

Our catechism class has been learning about the Christian vocation, and the priesthood of all believers. One of the things we've emphasized is that each and every one of us has a vocation, a call to live a holy life. It's not just for church leaders, but for everyone, in any type of work. So, it makes sense that each and everyone of us will have faith stories that we can use to point to God in Christ in our lives.

Imagine if someone here in this room asked another someone in this room, "What's God been doing in your life this week?" Would you be ready to share a close encounter of the divine kind? Or, would you pull back and run the other way? We only run if we haven't thought about it. If we're honest, we rarely take the time for serious reflection about how God has been active in our lives.

I'm not talking about how God opened up that parking spot in front of the mall just for you. Or, how God allowed you to make it to the airport in time for your flight. Those kinds of things might happen, but they also border on making God out to be a genie.

Jesus didn't die so we could have an easy life. Jesus died to bring us into relationship with God. He died so we could be forgiven. He died to give us new life - as a sign of that, Jesus is the first-born of the resurrection.

But, what about that time when you felt the need to pray for someone and later you learned that she had been undergoing a difficult time. Or, when you were afraid to undertake a new project, but somehow you had to courage to do it? Maybe you were given an unexpected word of support just when you needed the encouragement. Or, maybe your heart aches for the child going through the foster care system so you sign up to be a CASA volunteer (That's court appointed special advocate.) There are faith stories to be found in all those experiences.

So, why all this talk about faith stories? Well, for one thing, it's a way to help us reflect more on our relationship with God. We can see how God is active in our lives. We can grow in our relationship with God as

we ponder. Furthermore, it's a way to help us witness to others about our faith. If we are able to tell someone else how we've experienced God in our own lives, it could help them see God in their lives.

Since our purpose is to proclaim the kingdom of God and all that involves, it makes sense that we need to be able to articulate our roles in the kingdom. It makes sense that we need to be able to share how God is at work in our lives.

Well then, to whom are we to share this good news?

This past week, at our annual rostered ministers retreat, Southern Ohio Synod Bishop, Suzanne Dillahunt, told us to open our eyes. She said that people are all around us who need to hear the good news.

She went on to observe that we tend to see people in three different categories, two of which are not Christ-like. First, we might see people as the scenery. They are the background in our lives. They are people with whom we never interact, but they are there, just waiting for us to reach out to them. And, if we're honest, sometimes we'd just as soon not connect with them. We're too busy, or in a rush. Maybe they don't seem like "our kind" of people, whatever that means. We pass them on the street, or sit next to them in the theater, but we do not interact. They are background.

Then there are those whom we see as a means to an end. They are the cashiers, bank tellers, bus drivers, servers, co-workers, colleagues, classmates -- people whom we encounter in the course of our day. Our interactions with them are out of necessity to accomplish our tasks. They could easily become part of our background if we didn't need them.

Then, the third group are those whom we see as they really are. They are people who are important to us for the living of our days. Family and friends are in this group. Anyone whom we care for, and love. We want to be with them, connect with them, and share our lives with them.

The truth is that any of those groups can become people whom we see as they really are. Anyone we encounter can become more than background and more than a means to an end. When we see them as people for whom Jesus died, we see them as individuals, people to include in our daily lives.

When Jesus invited the fishermen to follow him and become fishers for people, they may have already known who he was. The news about a new rabbi in the village probably had reached them. Maybe they had even talked with him before that day on the beach. Or, the invitation from Jesus might have been his first encounter with them. But immediately upon speaking with Jesus, they knew they were with someone who saw them as they really were.

They were no longer part of the lakeside background in another person's life. They were not just the ones who sold fish in the market. They were somebodies to Jesus. Jesus not only wanted to share the good news with them, he saw in them people who could pass it on to others. And they would pass on faith stories to others, both of their own encounters with Jesus, and what they knew from scripture about God.

So, what's your faith story? When have you encountered God's power in your life? When have you acted on God's purpose for you? When have you been aware of God's presence?

Maybe, to be fair, I should tell you one of my faith stories. When I think about being aware of God's presence in my life, I think about a dream I had long ago. I was sitting alone in my childhood church, when suddenly I found myself wrestling with a snake. All I had was a small knife, which wasn't much help. Then, from behind me came hands which took hold of the snake. A voice said, "You are not alone, we'll do this together." I woke up.

Without over analyzing the dream for symbols, what I held onto was this -- God is with me even when I'm not thinking about God, and whenever I am in need of help, God is already present, ready to be with me.

Your faith story may or may not include a dream. It may be a simple encounter with another person which helps you think about Jesus in a different way. It might be really huge. But we all have those encounters with God, even if we're not looking for them.

My hope for us all is that we will look for those faith stories, and learn how to share them so that the people who are background and means to an end become people whom we see as they really are -- people loved by God. Amen.