

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
3rd Sunday after The Epiphany
January 22, 2017

John is in jail. The voice crying out in the wilderness thunders along the row of prison cells, shaking the other inmates out of their state of acquiescence to their unjust treatment. The great expanse of the Judean desert has been replaced by the confines of the prison cell. The great hands which drew people out of the water in their baptism were now shackled to the prison wall. John has been unjustly thrown into prison because he directed a message of repentance at King Herod, declaring Herod's behavior of stealing his brother's wife to be unjust and unholy. John's words of resistance to the morals of the king were met with violence, and ultimately, cost him his life.

Jesus responds immediately. His family once fled from another King Herod into Egypt. This time, though, Jesus walks directly into the clenched teeth of resistance to the Kingdom of Heaven. He enters Galilee, the territory held by this King Herod who had just imprisoned "the one who came before him, to prepare the way" for the in-breaking of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is the Kingdom of Heaven come near and he makes the only strategic choice he can make. Rather than waging war on Roman oppression in the typical way of brute force, rather than meeting darkness with darkness, he chooses positive protest. He chooses to proclaim a message of love, compassion, and justice, and to deliver it into the world by touching and calling the hearts of others, to come and follow him.

There are over 2 billion people in our world still responding to Jesus' message to, "Come and follow me", because his message of love cannot be imprisoned in the darkness of violence, hatred, and oppression.

Jesus makes a choice to be a force of positive protest against the oppression and violence of the world by asking people to change their minds, to repent, to release the grip on their hearts by the darkness of the world, by the fear that has been instilled within them, by the anger that has been incited within their hearts by the injustice done unto them by the ones who hold all the power. Jesus invites people into the light so that the spiritual energy of heaven can flow into them, change them, and change the world.

Jesus' positive protest looks like this: Jesus gathers, preaches, teaches, and heals the sick, and, by doing so, builds a movement of love, kindness, and compassion. Jesus shines the light into the darkness, for he knew what others know: that darkness cannot destroy darkness, only the light of love can. Jesus' presence resonates in the deep desires of the fishermen's hearts, who somehow already knew they wanted to be a part of this Kingdom, and they follow immediately. They turn aside from current preoccupations and move toward an adventurous possibility. Peter and Andrew, James and John, follow Jesus and his movement grows. People are fascinated by Jesus.

We have much to learn from this gospel story today. First of all, we are part of the Jesus movement, as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry continually reminds us. We are among the people who are fascinated with Jesus, with the people who carry the light of Jesus in their hearts, with the people who face oppression with love, with the people who forgive, who reconcile, who stand up for what's right in the world. A disciple can be described as someone who is fascinated by someone else, a person who desires to know and to do what they see in another. Our lives are inescapably interpersonal. We are always noticing others, what they think, say, and do. Toward many we are either indifferent or envious. Toward others, though, we gravitate and learn. If we claim to be a disciple of Jesus, then we must gravitate to those who show us what Jesus offered: love and compassion. We must learn the ways of justice, as Jesus taught. It is my prayer that we as Christians and people of God are always fascinated, always followers of, those who exude love and justice for all, because we can also be fascinated by those who exude hatred and prejudice. As Michael Curry said this week, "if it's not about love, then it's not about God." This is how we know. If it's about love, then it's about God, then we can follow.

It is my prayer also that we be a church that fascinates people. Let us be a church where people outside see others pouring into our doors, as we do what Jesus does in our story: as we gather, preach, proclaim, teach, and heal. Let us be a church where we take the light that brilliantly shines in through our altar window and we shine it out into the world and push away darkness. Let there be something in what we think, say, and do, that people gravitate toward and learn. And let that be of Jesus. Let us release the spiritual energy from heaven here within our community, so we can change and change the world.

I read an interesting blog post yesterday by author Ursula Le Guin, which speaks about a way to do this, to change herself to change her world, so that she can live with courage, with compassion, in patience, and in peace. These words of courage, compassion, patience and in peace are words that can describe Jesus' actions in our story this morning, as he headed into Galilee to confront power with the opening of people's heart to a love larger than they could ever imagine.

Ursula Le Guin speaks of the power of a warrior mentality, which is pervasive in our society and which has shaped our thinking and dominated our minds. She proposes that we tend to see the destructive force of aggression as the only way to meet any challenge. When we use the language of "waging war" on something, even if it's something that would be good to eliminate, like poverty or illiteracy, we are setting ourselves up to tear something down, not build something up. She aims to dismantle this warrior mentality, where there is a winner and a loser, when power reigns, and force is seen as the only path forward through her careful use of language and precision in her thinking. She believes there are other responses to violence or oppression than to return it, which are positive, proactive and which protest the wrongs in the world.

We know from Jesus' story today that she's right -- that refusing to meet violence with violence is a powerful, positive act, paradoxically so. It is not something that immediately makes sense

to us, for it is hard to see how gathering, teaching, and healing can actively resist fear and violence, but it did for Jesus. Ursula's point is that when all the words we have at our disposal to describe peaceful actions are negative – inaction, nonviolence, refusal, resistance, evasion – it's hard to see and keep in mind that the outcome of these so-called negatives is positive. This is what she wants to change. Le Guin goes on to state that “defending a cause without fighting, without attacking, without aggression, is not a reaction. It is an action. It is an expression of power. It takes control.”

Jesus' surrender on the cross to the power of the Roman empire was an expression of divine power. In that action, he took control of the heart of this world and we continue to live out Jesus' death and resurrection. The power of love conquering hate. The power of peace conquering war. The power of justice uprooting injustice in our society. Jesus would not take on the warrior mentality. Jesus refused to believe that the only way to end oppression was to become the oppressor. Jesus gathered people together, Jesus released the power of the Holy Spirit to nurture their souls and to change their lives, Jesus proclaimed the message of love, and Jesus saved us from our human tendency to fight back. Jesus built a movement of love, kindness, and compassion and invites us to follow.

Ursula Le Guin ends her blog like this: “I know what I want. I want to live with courage, with compassion, in patience, and in peace. The way of the warrior fully admits only the first of these, and wholly denies the last. The way of the water admits them all”.

She goes on to explain that “the flow of a river is a model for me of courage that can keep me going – carry me through the bad places, the bad times. A courage that is compliant by choice and uses force only when compelled, always seeking the best way, the easiest way, but if not finding any easy way still, always, going on.”

The cup of water that gives itself to thirst is a model for me of the compassion that gives itself freely. Water is generous, tolerant, does not hold itself apart, and lets itself be used by any need.

Running water and the sea are models for me of patience: their easy steady obedience to necessity, to the pull of the moon in the sea-tides and the pull of the earth always downward.

She concludes that she has no model for peace; only glimpses of it, metaphors for it, similes to what she cannot fully grasp and hold.

Peace, however hard it is to imagine, is our goal. It is what Jesus teaches. It is what Jesus offers. We fail so often at finding and living into peace. We get frustrated, angry, hurt, and tear things down instead of build them up. We are imperfect, but we must do our best, for that is why Jesus went into Galilee, why Jesus confronted Herod, why Jesus called the fishermen, why Jesus calls to us- for peace. Let us be disciples of Jesus, fascinated by his truth, drawn toward his love, and engaged in the way of peace. Let that be what we are always about, for it is what Jesus was always about. Amen.