

CALLED IN DARKNESS

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis on January 22, 2017

Epiphany 3A 2017

Matthew 4:12-23

If you were in church last week, it might sound to you like we have the same Gospel reading as we did last week. It is very similar but last week's reading was from the Gospel of John and today's is from Matthew. Each Gospel has this story of Jesus bringing on board his first disciples. At first, I was questioning the lectionary choice—with all that there is to read in the Gospels, why are we hearing the same story of the calling of the disciples two weeks in a row.

And then I thought about what happens almost every night in our house. We call people for dinner, and inevitably one or more than one person does not come when we sound that first call. So, we call again.

When it comes to hearing Jesus's call, sometimes—maybe even always—we need to be called more than once. We're busy. We've got other priorities. We're not sure *why* Jesus would be calling *us*. Most of us are not like these disciples who responded immediately. We need a second chance—or a twenty-second chance.

In the way Matthew tells the story, what stands out for me is the context of this calling. John has just been arrested. Jesus—who was baptized by John—Jesus, the one who John was preparing the way for—the one whose mission is closely connected to John's—In this moment, when John is arrested—when his ministry is brought to a definitive halt—Jesus does something really counterintuitive.

He leaves the familiarity and relative safety of his hometown of Nazareth. And he moves to the Galilee—to a town called Capernaum. Everything about this place seems so not the right place to launch a movement. Capernaum is just a little seaside fishing town. Why not do your launch in a place where you could really make a splash like the center of religious power—a place like Jerusalem?

Matthew tells us that it's to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus moves to the place by the sea which is also an ethnically diverse place—the land of the Gentiles—that word “gentiles” basically means “*people who are not like us.*”

So Jesus goes out to a place where there are lots of people not like him. And it's also a place where there is a lot of need—people are sick and hungry and maybe thinking they've been left for dead—that no one really cares whether they live or whether they die. That's what it means to sit in the darkness and in the shadow of death.

This is a story about being called in the context of darkness and even about being called in the shadow of death. These disciples Jesus is calling are by the sea but they are not surfers or beach bums. They are living in a time and a place where the oppressive power of the Romans

and their proxies is what defines their lives. It may be sunny outside but the darkness of fear and the darkness of nothing-will-ever-change is everywhere.

So, I want to explore for a bit what it looks like when you are called in the darkness into the light of Jesus's presence. The darkness is still there but it's not the same.

I think we had a taste of that on Thursday night with our Candlelight Vigil. It was literally dark but not super dark because the streetlights on 16th Street are pretty strong. When we were setting up the luminaries, we had to look for the darker spots so they would show up. There were groups of people from K Street to Kalmia, nearly at the Silver Spring line. But the really continuous stretch was a mile stretch around CLC. By the time the cars and buses reached us, they had gotten the message of what we were up to. So, lots of buses and cars honked in support. People were drawn to the light because the darkness seems so dark.

I want to shift gears for a moment and look at what the light of *Jesus's* presence looks like. There's a new movie out called "Silence". I haven't seen the movie but I read an interview with its star, Andrew Garfield, that was unlike any celebrity interview I've ever read. In the movie, Andrew Garfield plays a Jesuit missionary, so in preparation for this role he decided to do something called the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.

I was really interested in this because at a couple of points in my own life I considered doing them. But I never did—my stated reason was that I didn't have enough time—the shortest amount of time for an Ignatian Spiritual Exercise retreat is 8 days—and most often it is 30 days. "Not enough time" was my stated reason but the real reason was that I knew there was the possibility of significant transformation and I was afraid of what might happen.

But Andrew Garfield was bolder than I was and he went into a year-long adventure with the Spiritual Exercises, led by a Jesuit priest. He did this while making a movie. In some ways, as an actor, he was well-suited to this process, because a key component is using your imagination to really get into the stories of Jesus's life. The goal of this process is to know God more deeply and to live out that experience of knowing God in a life of compassionate action.

Garfield knew all of this going into the process. What surprised him, in his words, is that he fell in love—with Jesus. Those may be strange words for us but that's how he describes it. And it actually looks like what happened to the first disciples who were called by Jesus. They dropped everything and followed Jesus—the only time we do something like that is when we're in love.

I think a lot of us could relate to Andrew Garfield. When he started these spiritual exercises, he knew he was looking for something but he didn't know what. He had his own shadow of death that he was living in—and even though he's a famous actor—a celebrity—it might be the shadow that a lot of us are living in. The shadow that Andrew was living in was—in his words—the feeling of "not-enough-ness"—"that wound of feeling like what I have to offer is never enough."

Through this year of spiritual transformation, Andrew experienced the light of living in the love of Jesus. He discovered his "enoughness"—that enoughness that maybe we can only know when we are in the presence of someone who loves us as much as Jesus loves us.

Like the first disciples, we are called—not when we’ve got it all together—not when we are spiritually mature—not when we’re organized and have a plan. We are called when we are living in the darkness and shadow of our not-enoughness. We are called into the light of the loving presence of Jesus where that deep wound can be healed. And, in my experience, we’re called more than once into Jesus’s loving presence because we’re never completely out of the shadow of not-enoughness. We’re always doubting ourselves and feeling the weight of falling short—and we need Jesus to call us back into that light of complete love that convinces us that *we are* enough.

But the thing is, with Jesus, it’s always more than enough because love always leads—sooner or later—to more love. The disciples follow Jesus in his mission to bring God’s vision for the world to life. This is a mission that transforms lives in the most wholistic sense. People are healed spiritually, mentally, physically, and relationally. Jesus leads the way. Jesus does his healing work. He shows the disciples what that looks like—and then after a time, Jesus sends them out to do that healing work—that kingdom of God work—on their own.

It seems to me that this call story is such a timely one for us now. We’ve been going through our own spiritual transformation process as a congregation. We’ve been in small groups, listening for where God is calling us, trying to discern God’s vision for us now. And on Saturday, we’ll come together and we’ll move further along the path of discovering that vision. Maybe in our own way, we have that feeling of being people who are sitting in darkness. It’s not crystal clear to us what that vision is. And maybe we’re like Andrew Garfield—we somehow can’t shake that feeling of “not-enoughness”. We don’t have enough people, time, energy, faith—to get a clear vision--much less live it out.

And today, right now, in the middle of all that “not-enoughness” God *is* calling each one of us. Calling us to come closer. Calling us into the light of love that finds its way into our core and tells us that we are more than enough. God is also coming to us today—calling us as a people—people who do not have it all figured out yet and people who will help each other trust that who we are, what we have been given and what we will be given is more than enough.

One of the gifts we have is the gift of prayer. I know so many of you pray, and that you’ve been praying for our visioning process. As we come up to our Visioning Workshop, I’d like to ask you to intensify that prayer because I deeply believe that surrounding our workshop with prayer will take us to a different place. There’s an index card in your bulletin. I’d like to invite you to jot down a prayer for our vision. If you’d like it to be prayed aloud today, please pass it to the ushers in a minute when they come by. If you’d rather pin it up on the prayer board in the Fellowship Hall, that would also be a gift. So, let’s take a moment now, so those who would like to can write a prayer.

Thank you, Lord, for coming to us in our darkness and calling us to live in your light.
Amen.