

Eastern Shore Chapel, Virginia Beach  
January 26, 2020  
3rd Sunday after Epiphany (RCL/A)  
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Isaiah 9:1-4  
Psalm 27:1, 5-13  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23

There is a parable-like story told of a boring, little town where literally nothing ever happened. Day in and day out the people of the town went about their lives doing the same thing at the same time on the same day as they've always done. One day the members of the town council that decided that they needed to do something brash and bold to change the lives of the people in their community. Of all the things they could have done, their decision was made to hold a footrace.

On the appointed day, the runners showed up in all their athletic gear. The would-be runners gathered at the starting line. There was a countdown, and the starter's gun went off. But then, something very strange happened.

The runners took a few steps across the starting line, and then abruptly stopped. One man fell to his knees, crying, "I have crossed the starting line! This is the happiest day of my life!" He repeated this again and again, and even began singing a song about how happy this day was for him.

Another woman started jumping for joy. "Yes!" she shouted, raising her fist in the air. "I've finally done it! Finally I am a race-runner!" She ran around jumping and dancing, getting and giving high-fives to others who shared her joy at being in the race.

Several people formed a circle and prayed, quietly thanking God for the privilege of crossing the starting line, and thanking God that they were not like the skeptics who thought the race was a crazy idea.

The spectators were baffled by this strange behavior, but finally one observer turned to a neighbor and suggested that maybe they ought to get into the race. And so they did. Many others joined them.

Soon many were kicking off their dress shoes, slipping out of their jackets, throwing all this unneeded clothing on the grass. And they ran — past the praying huddles and past the crying individuals and past the jumping high-fivers. And they found hope and joy in every step, and they grew stronger with every mile and hill. To their surprise, the path never ended — because in this race, there was no finish line. So they were never bored again.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2006).

First of all, I must say one thing about this parable and the Christian congregation known as Eastern Shore Chapel. This congregation is not and has not been a boring place. Quite the opposite is true for this is a place of activity.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, yet.... For the last few years life has not always been easy for this congregation. There have been times when you have had your challenges. You are a congregation of great promise, that for a variety of reasons has gone through seasons of life when you have found joy to be elusive.

In the scriptures you heard about the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, two tribes of our ancestor Jacob. For hundreds of years before Jesus came onto the scene Zebulun and Naphtali were tribes of great promise that despite all of their activity seemingly had never achieved the promise after which they sought. They were described as being places of darkness, sadness and gloom. In the very geographic region where Jesus was beginning his ministry the people who belonged to these historic tribes were seeing in Jesus a new light, a light that was shining into their darkness, sadness and gloom. Would Jesus be the cure for their gloom. I can hear them asking themselves, "Can it be that we are getting a new start from this man whom some even call the new rabbi?"

Then there were the fishermen James, John, Andrew and Peter who each day worked with their father Zebedee on the Sea of Galilee casting and mending their nets. They were living out their lives with the only promise they had: the promise that the next day would be like the last day; that they would spend their entire lives doing what they had always done.

For all these people, Jesus was a new start in life. Their dispirited sadness was something that a local man like Jesus would have known was the cause for a darkness of spirit. Beginning with that firebrand John and his baptism of repentance at the Jordan River, Jesus' mission took him to all these dispirited people. When these people encountered Jesus their spirits were being raised and made new. They were getting new starts; new opportunities; new vistas and horizons for life. We call this HOPE! In Jesus they were finding the elusive hope for which they yearned. For them the writer of our Isaiah passage wrote that in the promised one they would find a joy that is likened to the joy of bringing in a massive harvest of crops from the fields.

The members of the tribes and the fishermen all had one thing in common. They hungered for something else; something more than they were finding in their daily lives.

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<sup>2</sup> I have a belief about our inclinations that at times can lead us to frenetic activity thinking that the more active we are, the more aligned we are with God's mission for us. All too frequently the problem is that we have not been willing to pause our activity long enough to ponder God's call to a mission in our surroundings. I believe that each congregation is called to determine, in very simple and understandable terms, the mission in their neighborhood to which God has called them. My belief is that next they ought to be about the business of evaluating and measuring every single activity of their congregation by the standard of the mission. Then after a season or so of examining, allow to continue only those missional activities that are consistent with the mission of the congregation.

That something else was a new start. Their good news was that they were finding this new start in Jesus! To them Jesus was the new light that was brightening their lives and giving them the hope of a new beginning. Literally, their sadness and gloom was being turned into joy.

The Bible story tells us that at the promise of joy the fishermen were experiencing was so strong that “immediately” they left everything and followed Jesus. Neither James, John, Andrew, nor Peter paused to think; they did not consult their families or their bank balances. When Jesus called, they went.

Sisters and brothers of the congregation known as Eastern Shore Chapel, you have been given that rarest of opportunities: a new start. With Cameron as your spiritual leader and guide, you have been given an opportunity to start anew. In fact, the new ways of the new start have already begun. There is no time or place to turn back to the old ways.

Often when new beginnings come there is both hope and challenge. The hope is obvious; the challenge, well, not so much.

It would never be untrue to say that Jesus came to earth to die. In a little over a week we will lead twenty-eight pilgrims in the Holy Land from the place of Jesus’ birth to the place of his death and empty tomb. This is the birth-to-death-to-resurrection way of Christ Jesus. Yet, even though that way of Jesus’ life is true, it is even more true to say that the Biblical evidence says that first he came to live.

It has been said that when Jesus taught about the Kingdom of Heaven, as he did in today’s gospel lesson, that he wasn’t teaching about how to get to heaven or about “...our escape from this world into another one, but (about) God’s sovereign rule coming ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’”<sup>3</sup> I don’t have to remind you that every time we pray the prayer of Jesus that we know as the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for life to be “...on earth as it is in heaven.”

Fellow Christ-followers, for this way of life “...on earth as it is in heaven...” to actually happen, we are called to be obedient followers of the Lord Jesus. The late German Christian writer Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that Jesus’ call to “follow me” was a call “to absolute discipleship.” Bonhoeffer said that only in surrendering ourselves to Jesus’ command to follow him could we, paradoxically, know our greatest joy.<sup>4</sup>

Another teacher and writer, Philip Turner has said time and time again that not only are we called to be obedient during the easiest and most convenient moments of life, but also in the hard moments when we are challenged by the seductiveness of sex, power

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<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship (1959; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1995), 37–38.

and money.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Jesus' call is to nothing less than such obedience; obedience from the prison to the parlor, from the street to the symphony, from the sanctuary to Starbucks. Obedience to Jesus` is EVERYTHING! Obedience and joy are inseparably linked together. Without one there not the other. Without the other there is not the one.

This congregation has been looking for a new start – and already has embarked on some terrifically creative and new ways of being. What comes next? Do you just continue to do what you have always done, continue to “mend our nets” in the same old ways and get the same results? Or is it time for the new to come? Is it time to celebrate what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of a fledgling congregation at Corinth: “If anyone is in Christ that person is a new creation. The old things have passed away and the new has come.”<sup>6</sup> God the Holy Spirit is doing something new in your midst; something that you could never do on your own.

If indeed the new start has come, and obviously that is what we are celebrating today, then we need to mark our time together with our commitment to being obedient to Christ. In just a few minutes we will gather at the baptismal font to renew our baptismal vows. This is the time when we will recommit ourselves to the mission to which Christ Jesus has called us; a mission of being fishers of God's people.

For this reason, my sisters and brothers, rejoice and be glad. Our living Lord and God has called you to a place of new beginning. Let our thanks to the living Lord and God be made known in the sound of our voices as we renew our commitment to God's calling upon our lives. AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> Phillip Turner, Christian Ethics and the Church: Ecclesial Foundations for Moral Thought and Practice (Baker Academic. Grand Rapids, MI: 2015) Kindle Books, Location 340: “It will be necessary to ask theological questions as well as ethical ones. What is the goal of creation set by God the Father? How is that end lived out and brought near by God the Son? And how are we drawn into the end for which the world was made through the Son and in the Spirit? The answer to these questions will lead to ones about how we are to live together, how we are to live a holy life as individuals, and how we as the body of Christ are to live within the various societies and political structures of which we are a part.”

<sup>6</sup> II Corinthians 5:17, NSRV.