THIRD SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

January 22, 2023

*“When We See the Light”* Matthew 4:12-23

The story of Jesus calling the first disciples and telling them that he will make them “fishers of people” is very familiar. Most of us recognize and remember it because it is succinct and rather catchy, too—a really nice “slogan” or catch-phrase about discipleship.

The story itself is also very much of a marvel, even a miracle because, lo and behold, the men Jesus is speaking to do just what he invites them to do: they immediately drop their nets and follow after him.

In the centuries since, all of us have read or heard this passage proclaimed with a mixture of awe, admiration, and probably some feelings of discomfort. Most of us became disciples by joining a church. That was a serious commitment that we continue to grow in through prayer, worship, reading the Bible, and other ways like fellowship and supporting the ministry of this church and other projects that help people.

So, when we listen to the story of the first disciples, most of us wonder what our own reaction would have been. Would we find ourselves… nonplussed? Ambivalent? Reluctant?

All of these are very human reactions, which is what makes the sudden and decisive reaction of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, so surprising. We listen to their story and are delighted and amazed. We admire them—no period of discernment for them!

For all of the years that I have read and pondered, prayed and studied this story I simply took the story at its face value and have tried to draw meaning from the simple “mechanics” of it. That is, the physical elements of it: Jesus approaches two men, He invites them to follow him and—*boom!*—they do.

OK, but *why* –why do they follow him so quickly, so decisively?

In the past few years, I have watched a re-telling of the story of Jesus on television—it is a television series that is now in its third season—in this re-telling of it, Jesus has been in the neighborhood for a few months before the passage read for us this morning. In those months, people get to know him. They meet him in the marketplace. They listen to him talk. They hear the power in his words and get a sense of his divine nature.

I rather like that idea because it then makes sense that finally, when he walks along the shore that day and invites the four fishermen to come along and follow him, they are ready. They have seen and heard the voice of goodness and grace. They have already seen the light of his love and they are like the people Matthew refers to in Isaiah, *“the people who sat in darkness.”*

Peter, Andrew, James, and John—they were the people who *“have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.* [Isaiah 9:2]

Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and their families and the other people among whom they lived—all of them were living in deep darkness and then Jesus came to Capernaum and began his ministry. The four who were invited to follow him were like people who had finally seen a sliver of light in the overwhelming darkness, which was their life—and they reached eagerly towards it.

Despite the daily insults and indignities of living under Roman occupation, Jesus had come into their lives bringing with him the assurance that their life had meaning and goodness.

Despite whatever sins they may have been carrying in their hearts, Jesus offered them grace, and a new path to follow.

Despite the family connections that should have prevented them from picking-up and leaving with him, Jesus brought into the lives of all of the men and women he touched the kind of love that makes room for goodness to flourish and grow in the lives of individuals, and in the lives of a community and a people.

People who sit in deep darkness, when they see the light of God, they do not hesitate, they make their way toward it—not only for themselves, but also for the many others all around them, the many who are also failing and suffering and looking for the light.

So, Matthew is telling us that at the dawn of Jesus’ ministry, he came also calling for people to repent (like John the Baptist did). However, rather than only a call to turn away from what they were doing, Jesus was also calling them to turn toward what God is doing through Jesus—turn from the darkness in their lives and toward the light that is dawning upon the world. Turn to the light of God and all that it is illuminating in the world around them.

Some of what the light of Christ will illumine will be glorious. His words will open the disciples’ eyes and hearts to a new sense of meaning and mercy, a new sense of acceptance and community. As Jesus’ disciples, they will see people healed of their physical infirmities—the blind are given back their sight, the lame are healed and walk.

They will see others healed emotionally and spiritually. Demons will be cast out of people who are restored to their right minds and their families. Others will know the blessing of having a huge weight lifted from their hearts as Jesus offers them forgiveness. The disciples will even watch as people are raised from the dead.

Unfortunately, the light of Christ will also bring to light abuses and injustices, too. Jesus’ light will confront religious officials who will not only doubt him but feel threatened by him. They will also realize that he is calling them to repentance, too. That is, they will realize that he is revealing their arrogance and greediness and the way in which both of these flaws have prevented them from showing what the Law was supposed to do. It was supposed to guide them into ways of showing and living the love of God. It is supposed to comfort and strengthen God’s beloved people.

As Disciples of Christ, our good news is that we need not wait and wonder. The light we need is already among us. Every Sunday morning, we stop and acknowledge this when the candles on the altar are lit with the light that is brought in from the world. This is where the light of God lives—the light we know as the Holy Spirit.

We acknowledge it again at the end of worship as the light is carried back into the world, signifying to us—*promising* us—that the light of Christ—his Holy Spirit—lives in the world *with* us. It is never held back but goes with us into our lives so that we may always have hope and be strengthened. So that we may always have the light we need, and so that we may be ready to respond when we see it. When we see the light.

Right now, there is so much darkness in our lives, but we are promised that the darkness will never overcome the light that has come into the world through Christ. So, our project must become looking out for even a sliver of light that is waiting for us to see and embrace it.

And we are doing this, we - Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, we are doing this. For example, we know how expensive it is to live here on Oahu. The people who are living on the second floor of Kibo Kan, they saw the light that is Family Promise. We saw that same light and made a place for Family Promise here on our church grounds.

However, there are many more people who need this kind of assistance. For them, the darkness is still profound and will be until there is more affordable housing available for them.

Who will reach for the light that is even now breaking into that darkness—when will we see the light, will it be us?

Greta Thunberg, and many other young people all over the world, have seen the light illumine a world in great need of change so that the world itself, and all of us, will survive and thrive. This is a light that is constantly fighting to exist because there are so many powers and principalities whose priorities are for profit rather than creation care.

Who will bank that light of those young people into a roaring fire and commit our time and treasure to new forms of energy, new attitudes toward the land, air, and water? Who will dedicate time and resources to helping people become trained and ready to participate in what is being called a “green economy?”

This church has been faithful in lifting-up in the community the need for alternative ways of living through our “Green Day” festival we offer here on our church campus every year. How can we join with others to make our own efforts even more visible? Aside from this yearly event, what else can we do? Who can we join with to advocate (and agitate) for real change in policy and practice, and on what level are we willing to extend ourselves? When we see that light, will we reach toward it?

Friends, the prophet, Isaiah, saw the darkness people were living with. He also saw them get up and rejoice when they saw the light.

The gospel writer, Matthew, also lived among people living in darkness, and he, too, saw what happened when the light came upon them. They followed. They left their darkness behind and followed Jesus into a new light and new life.

These are our examples. This is our call, our invitation, our summons. We have seen the light; it is here among us, and my prayer is that we will embrace God’s light. Let us leave all that we cling to that is darkness and follow Christ. Let us embrace God’s light and the strength and hope that God gives us. Now that we see the light, let us follow, work, and rejoice. Let this be so. Amen.