

THIRD SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME: JANUARY 26-7.

The glow of Christmas fades further into our rear view mirror. However that holiday affected us, those emotions have passed. Easter looms on the horizon, but not close enough to start our hearts pumping just yet. Whether we rejoice in the new life of spring or the fun of the egg hunts or the mystery of the resurrection, we have to wait as we now enter the coldest part of winter with little in the church year to warm our spirits. We might as well face it: society cares much more about the upcoming Super Bowl than it does about this time in the church calendar which we Catholics call Ordinary Time.

While we're at it, we might as well admit that the church's approval rating could use a shot in the arm, even apart from society's apathy toward the church calendar. We've heard the attacks. The rest of the world piles up the adjectives on the church: irrelevant, hypocritical, judgmental, uncool and the most devastating of all: boring. At best, the world considers the church "nice," but insignificant.

Rather than surrender to this critique of our mission, we can look at how Matthew describes the call of the disciples. Although we won't celebrate the real birthday of the church for a few more months, when Pentecost Sunday comes, we can now see the first stirrings of the church in today's gospel. Jesus will eventually turn his whole mission over to the church once she is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The church, even from this very first call, can do ministry only because of the grace and love of God. After his baptism, Jesus begins ministry in Galilee. Matthew cites Isaiah who stated that those who sat in darkness have seen a great light. Into the struggle to make a living, into the bitterness of obeying commands from Roman soldiers who occupied their land, God sent Jesus as a light to the Galileans. Our ministry in the church always begins with God's initiative, God's gracious action to shine light into our own, personal darkness. God still shines the light of comfort, hope strength, forgiveness, healing and peace into this world of ours. God still reconciles, still liberates, still redeems.

We gather to worship God, perhaps because he has shone light into our darkness. The darkness of grief or loneliness or crisis may have threatened to overwhelm us, but God shone the light, thus allowing us to push back that darkness.

Our work as the church does not stop with worship, however. We often think of coming to a church as a way to gain the resources that we need to get through life. We talk of filling our tanks, or recharging our batteries for the week that waits to pounce on us. And we certainly do need a full tank and charged-up batteries because many of us face a week full of stress or pressure or irritation—or all three! Some of us face a week of aching joints and wistful thoughts of what our bodies once could do and so we do need to hear about God's light piercing our darkness.

Yet when Jesus finds Simon and Andrew, he does not offer them resources for their stress or their frustration. He approaches them in the middle of their jobs. As they are casting a net into the sea, he invites them to leave their careers behind in order to follow him. Jesus then calls James and John as they are doing the necessary work of mending their nets. Mending nets was a way of looking to the future, preparing for their next excursion.

The brothers too leave their work, their equipment and even their Father behind in order to follow Jesus. But what about their Father? Had he planned to retire soon, turning the family business over to his 2 sons? Would he now have to carry on without them, using aching muscles and deteriorating joints to cast the nets himself because they traipsed off to follow this idealistic preacher? Besides leaving their

careers and families, what would the four of them do for money? The gospel writers never tell us how Jesus and his followers made money. John tells us that Judas kept their money, but we don't know where it came from. At one point, they hunger so much that they pluck heads of grain to eat. We have to ask: did they leave behind a stable career so as to live hand to mouth?

And so to what kind of life did Jesus call them? Did the four of them know that John the Baptist sits in prison? Did they understand the risks of accepting Jesus' call? Could they have anticipated the opposition that awaited them? It would seem that danger lurks over the whole scene.

We might have trouble understanding or even entirely appreciating what happens in these "call scenes" as Matthew describes them. Matthew makes it sound as though the fishermen leave their livelihoods without a moment's hesitation. Why would they do that? Jesus calls them and they drop everything to follow, without so much as asking a question. What did they see in Jesus that caused them to follow, seemingly leaving their nets in midair? Luke at least presents their decision as coming after Jesus has healed a few unfortunates and has begun to draw some crowds. As Luke tells it, they saw something that would have convinced them that Jesus was worth following. In Matthew's scene, however, we're given no clue why they follow so quickly.

Could we, in good conscience, encourage such immediate loyalty? Haven't we seen the cult leaders who destroy the lives of their followers? Haven't we seen the scams where smooth-talking hucksters tug on the heartstrings of vulnerable older people in order to take their money? Wouldn't we encourage potential followers to check things out first?

Sometimes, when we read a passage of scripture where we cannot fully understand what happens on the surface, we can find a deeper meaning. When Matthew presents the disciples following Jesus as soon as he calls them, we should not read the scene as encouraging recklessness or a lack of proper caution. We do not follow everyone who calls. We do not donate to every charity that solicits us. We can, however, find a message in this passage worth affirming. We should read this as a call to put away our own excuses and our resistance to God's call for us to work through the church so as to shine God's light in the darkness.

At this point, I would like to make a pitch for the priesthood and the Religious Life for women. It is sad and a little disturbing that we read that so many parents are not encouraging any interest that their children may have for full time church ministry, and that they are actually discouraging them from even thinking about it. And so I want to tell you about my life as a priest of 43 years.

It is a wonderful, fulfilling life! We are invited into people's lives at moments of great happiness and great sadness. We are given the honor of sharing a faith journey with you day after day, weekend after weekend. We have the time to reflect upon why we're here on earth and have the opportunity to follow in Jesus' footsteps because we are unencumbered by family responsibilities and worries. It can be a lonely life and prayer doesn't always fill in the holes that come from not having a family of our own, but those moments usually pass whenever we're invited into key moments of your lives. As you look around the diocese, you must notice that most of the priests are coming from other countries; and certainly we ought to be thankful that so many are willing to leave behind their families and countries of origin in order to serve the people of Utah. But what about vocations here at St. John the Baptist? This is such a wonderful faith community-- such enriching communities must continue and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, are the glue that holds us Catholics together.

True, there are embarrassing scandals in the Church and many policies and teachings don't always make a lot of sense to us, but the way to address those problems is not by staying outside the loop. By saying this, I am not in any way belittling lay ministry and leadership, but generous people are coming forth for those ministries in great numbers. We need priests and religious women to stand in public witness to the life of Jesus Christ. Those to whom much is given, much is expected; and much has been given to this community by the leadership of Monsignor Moore and Sisters Karla and Celine and so many others. But we need more of the likes of them to keep our Church running.

I love being a priest. When my parents died and I inherited a good amount of money, I reflected upon my future in the priesthood and I decided that there was no other way of life that really interested me and so I stayed and the Dominicans got my inheritance. To be honest, that wasn't a very hard decision for me. Look at Pope Francis, TIMES' man of the year; look at what an impact that this good priest has had on so many people. Being pope may not be in the cards, but ministering in our own backyard is a way to bring about the good that the church can do for the world.

But now back to today's gospel: Jesus may not call us to give up our careers, but he may call us to carve out time in our lives to shine light into the darkness. We all have heard of people who gave up a good living so that they could work for much less money in a mission field, but we can't all do that. In this passage, however, Jesus calls us to seek out an area of darkness where we can shine some light. Where can we find a crying need that calls for our time and talent, not just a check torn out of a pad?

When a new beginning shows up on our life's itinerary, believing that this new thing, this new venture, this new relationship is God's will and purpose for our lives and that nothing welds steel into our souls like resolve. This sense of a beginning in our Lord's public ministry felt here in Matthew's gospel transitions into a movement that gathers followers, then and now.

We might see the structure of this passage as beginning with grace because it quotes Isaiah about the light shining in the darkness and it ends with grace because Jesus continues his ministry of healing and preaching. In the middle, we find our call and our response, allowing us to find in our ministry new insights, new spiritual resources and new experiences of God's presence. As we offer the light, we will see more light ourselves as God calls each of us to service, regardless of our circumstances.

So what is this sense of a beginning for you? How might we make this movement a beginning moment in our lives? What if we acknowledged our apprehension with one breath, and then took in deeply the oxygen of resolve saying with our lips and our lives: I too will follow! And who knows where this beginning might lead: a changed heart, a more open acceptance of others in their need and longings, and even a new awareness that God's Spirit in Christ is the very atmosphere in which we live and move and have our being.

And so we find in our response that God not only gives us the resources for ministry, but he also gives us a spiritual maturity that more than makes up for whatever we may have left behind. But in order to grow, the church needs your time, treasure and talent. This is what is being asked of us and so what are we willing to do in order to bring about a light that pierces the darkness?