

Third Sunday After Epiphany
Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

Follow Me^{*}

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Some people are avid readers of comic books. Perhaps a number of you are as well. Are there any fans of Comic Con out there? I'm usually not a big fan of that genre, but recently I read a three-part graphic novel series that really captured my attention. The series is called "March," and it depicts the life of Congressman John Lewis of Atlanta in the style of comic book drawings. In fact, it is currently the #1 best seller of biography and history graphic novels on Amazon.com.

During this past week, Congressman Lewis has been in the news a lot. Lewis, of course, was one of the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement. He was an organizer of the March on Washington in 1963 and the youngest speaker there. And he was brutally beaten by state troopers on "Bloody Sunday" in 1965 during the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery.

It's fitting that Lewis captured the national attention during a week that was marked on the one end by the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday, and on the other end by the Women's March on Washington and Sister Marches all around the world. Lewis was, of course, a friend and confidant of Dr. King's. And Lewis, along with dozens of members of Congress, boycotted the inauguration on Friday after he was disparaged on Twitter for daring to question the legitimacy of November's election.

I learned an interesting fact while reading the "March" graphic novel series. It turns out that Lewis always wanted to be a minister. He wrote, "Growing up, what I really wanted to be was a preacher. An uncle gave me a Bible for Christmas when I was four – and yes, I do remember when I was four. I'll never forget my mother reading aloud to me the first words in that book: 'In the beginning, God created the heaven[s] and the earth.'"

In fact, when Lewis was a child, he used to preach to the chickens that were owned by his sharecropper parents. He would tell them about John the Baptist and quote from the Beatitudes. Lewis would also baptize baby chicks by full immersion and conduct burial services – complete with eulogies – for the chickens who died of natural causes. His first bachelor's degree was from the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, where he was a work-study student.

It's appropriate to reflect upon the self-giving and sacrificial life of someone like Congressman Lewis in light of this week's gospel in which Jesus tells his first disciples

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to “Follow me.” Although Lewis ultimately did not become an ordained minister, he did become a civil-rights activist and eventually entered national politics. He has been called the “conscience of the U.S. Congress” and has in fact followed Christ in his daily work. Just as the first disciples met Jesus while they were doing their jobs as fishermen, Lewis has met Jesus in his vocational calling as a member of Congress.

What does it mean for each of us to follow Christ? When most people hear the word “calling” or “vocation,” they usually think of ordained ministry or full-time service to the church as a lay employee. But that is actually not the case in most instances, nor should it be. Like Congressman Lewis, we are all called to serve God right where we are. Indeed, Jesus called the first disciples while they were working as fishermen, and he spoke to them using language and images that they could understand and relate to: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

We see examples of this faithful “fishing” throughout our congregation. We might find our calling, as Dr. Philip Spivey has, as a psychologist and as a former member of the diocesan Commission on Ministry. Or we might find our calling as Joan Seymour did as a director of political affairs at the United Nations and as a member of our rector search committee. Or we might find our calling as Pat Williams has, as a nurse and as our parish historian and a leader of our altar society. (I hope that each of you don’t mind my using you as examples.)

We are living in difficult times, and it’s striking how today’s readings speak directly to our condition. You may have noticed the references to the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali in the readings. We heard from the prophet Isaiah about the people “who walked in darkness” with a “bar across their shoulders” and “the rod of their oppressor.” Similarly, we heard from St. Matthew about those “who sat in the region and shadow of death.” What exactly does all that mean?

Well, Zebulun and Naphtali were the first of the twelve tribes of Israel that were conquered in the 8th century BCE after a ruthless political regime – the Neo-Assyrian Empire – rose to power. After the fanatical king Tiglath-Pileser III seized their royal throne during a civil war, the Assyrians engaged in a policy of mass deportations by forcibly removing the Israelites from their own country. Archeologists also tell us that the Assyrians likely constructed a massive fortification wall around a harbor to keep the neighboring nations out. Does any of this sound familiar?

But there is good news in all of this. The prophet Isaiah predicted that, despite the fact that Zebulun and Naphtali stood historically for a political regime of “gloom” and “anguish,” a new light would shine in the midst of the “land of deep darkness.” Indeed, it was in those very lands that Jesus began his ministry – by Galilee and Capernaum by the sea. And it was in those very lands that the first disciples – Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John – were called to follow Christ and to proclaim the values of the kingdom of heaven, not the kingdom of empire and oligarchs.

Today's gospel reminds us that each of us is similarly called – right where we are – to proclaim the great light of Christ and to shine as the dawn for others. During this season after Epiphany, it is especially important that we serve as beacons of hope to others – just as Congressman Lewis and so many others have done, including the estimated two and a half million people who participated in some 670 marches around the world yesterday.

There is an event tomorrow evening at 7:00 pm at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine called “The Inauguration of Hope.” Ethan Hawke and other artists will be there to recommit to the values that we share in common. And for the first one hundred days of the new administration, one hundred prominent religious studies scholars – including our own Karina Hogan – will be writing a public letter each day to the leaders of our government about what our faith traditions say about our values and voices. How are you called to follow Christ, right from where you are?

This afternoon, immediately after mass, we will be celebrating the ministry of Fr. Ron, Rosemary, and Sarah with us over the last year. They bravely followed Jesus' call to travel some 11,000 miles from Australia to shepherd our parish during the past year, and for that we are incredibly grateful.

It's been said that the mark of a good priest is not so much the Best Actor award, but that of Best Supporting Actor. (It's a great metaphor during the beginning of the awards season!) The aim of ordained ministry is not to glorify oneself, but to support and empower others to find their own vocational calling to proclaim the light of Christ in the world.

Fr. Ron has done that personally for me, and he has generously given me the opportunity to grow pastorally and liturgically at Transfiguration over the last year. Perhaps someday there will be a comic book or graphic novel about Fr. Ron's life as Zorro or as Wombat Divine. Let us take a moment to acknowledge the ministry of Fr. Ron, Rosemary, and Sarah, and let us give thanks for their light to our parish community.

Let us end with a prayer of thanksgiving from the Book of Common Prayer for our nation and for all who shine forth Christ's light of hope. Let us pray:

Almighty God, giver of all good things: We thank you for the torch of liberty which has been lit in this land. It has drawn people from every nation, though we have often hidden from its light. Help us, O Lord, to finish the good work here begun. And hasten the day when all our people, with many voices in one united chorus, will glorify your holy Name. Amen.