

3 Epiphany, Year A
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A good friend and fellow Episcopal priest told me years ago about going to see an elderly parishioner of his a month or so after her husband had died. Her name was Mary, she was well into her 90's, and she had been married for over 65 years. My friend asked her how she was doing, and she said she was struggling, which seemed reasonable of course. But then she explained, "I'm really struggling, because I'm having a hard time figuring out what God is calling me to do in this next chapter of my life."

And my friend said he wanted to tell her, "Mary! You're well into your 90's. Relax! It's time for you to coast." But he held back, because he sensed that Mary had something to teach him. Mary realized that God never stops calling us. Throughout our whole lives, it never ends, right up to the time of our death when we are called into the ultimate unknown.

In the Gospel lesson, we see Jesus calling disciples who respond immediately, and honestly, it all seems so unbelievable to me. When I read this story, I often ponder how unrealistic it seems that someone would so immediately drop everything, the security of their nets, boats, livelihood, and family, all to follow Jesus into something completely unknown.

And the other thing that strikes me about this story is how inadequate it can make me feel, maybe even a little guilty, because I feel sure there's no way I could respond like this.

Later on in the Gospel, there's another story about Jesus calling people to follow him, and this one seems more realistic. In the later story, when Jesus invites people to follow him, one responds, "Well,...first let me go bury my father." And another one says, "Let me first go say good-bye to my family." This seems so much more like how I would respond. "Maybe later. I'm really busy now."

But maybe these stories about being called, with some responding and others resisting, are inviting us to ponder how our whole lives are about God constantly calling us to leave what we know for something we can't imagine, and how we often resist it.

From the time we are born, we have to leave the comfort of our mother's womb. The small child eventually has to get out of her mother's lap, but is forever begging to be picked up again and carried. The toddler eventually has to give up his pacifiers. The adolescent has to go through the pain of separating from his family, discovering his own identity and new love relationships. On and on it goes.

The truth is that God is constantly preparing something new for us; it's what it means to be human and alive. In fact, the clinical definition of death is the cessation of change.

It has been said that at some point in our lives, it is as if we find ourselves in the Intensive Care Unit, hooked up by wires and tubes to all of the things that are sustaining our lives: our career,

our wealth, our possessions, our titles, our awards, our relationships, our marriage, our children.... All of these things sustaining us, keeping us alive in midlife. At least, that is what the ego believes – “You can’t unhook or let go of any of it, or you’ll die,” the ego says.

And the task of our lives there in the ICU is to detach: one by one to unhook every one of these attachments, to unplug ourselves from each of those things that we have believed was sustaining us and making our lives possible. It’s too scary. We can’t imagine it.

But the truth is that it is often the very thing we dread the most that ends up moving us to the next level, the next phase in life, teaching us what is true and most important. Anyone who has had a brush with death or some other devastating loss or tragedy will often tell you, “It was the worst thing that ever happened to me. ... And it was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Religious people pay special attention to such paradoxes, because when we find that two opposite things are true at the same time, we are entering into what theologians call “nondual consciousness.” In other words, we are entering into the realm of the Divine, the Eternal, and our True Life. It is in dying that we live. It is in the pain of being lost that we discover the joy of being found. It is in a devastating absence that we discover a profound Presence.

And it is in this spirit that Jesus is saying, “Drop your nets, leave your boats, walk away from the things that you think sustain you, and I will lead you into your True Life.”

Often we are too literal about this. Often, it is not that God is calling us to leave our job or leave our marriage, because in doing so, we are very likely to take our life of death (our destructive ways) into our new job or our new marriage. No, often God’s call is to make profound changes right where we are, to leave the way we relate to our work and our spouse.

But we resist this task of detachment from our old ways with every fiber of our being. The ego cannot stand this sort of change, because the ego depends on things remaining known and reliable, even if they are killing us.

When I lead an Instructed Eucharist here, we all meet in the back of the church, behind the baptismal font, the symbol of our birth in God and our True Life. We talk about the procession every Sunday morning, leading from our birth in God represented in the font, to the nearer presence represented in the altar. We talk about how the procession is a symbol of the whole human journey from birth to death and resurrection, how we do our best to follow Jesus behind his cross. This is why the crucifer moves so intentionally, so solemnly; this is our life.

And then, the class gathers in the sanctuary where we all stand around the altar and have Communion together. And usually I point out a seemingly small detail that almost always fascinates the class. I point out that customarily, in the altar of an Episcopal Church, there are etched or carved, five crosses, symbolizing the five wounds of Jesus dying on the cross – hands, feet, and side. It is a holy moment in our gathering at the altar, and some members of the class quietly want to touch the crosses. Five wounds, five human senses – taste, touch, smell, sight,

and hearing. Gradually, we lose them all, gradually at our death, we detach, unhook, let go, and discover our home-going, discover at the end that the journey has really only just begun.

John Denver sings that he was born the summer of his 27th year, going home to a place he had never been before. It's a line he got from TS Eliot's "Four Quartets," returning home and knowing it for the first time. This is the human journey, and the question is whether we'll answer the call to make that journey. Will we unhook? Will we drop our nets, leave our boats? This is another one of those paradoxes that religious people have to pay attention to: that you have to leave home in order to find it. You have to lose your life in order to gain it.

Once in a beautiful, posh, Episcopal church like this one, an older lady, a lifelong Episcopalian and stylish member of the upper class, had a conversion experience. Everyone noticed the change, everyone could tell something had happened. There was a newfound sense of ease about her life, a lightness of being. She seemed more relaxed, with an underlying sense of joy.

Her rector invited this elegant lady to speak to the congregation one Lent, to offer, if you will, her "witness" about her faith. It was part of a Lenten series in which the rector was encouraging his parishioners to "testify" or talk about their faith. And the refined lady politely refused. "Oh, no," she said. "Episcopalians don't do things like that." But her rector was a persistent man and wouldn't let it go. So, one day she relented. And when the Sunday came for this lady to speak, she quietly made her way to the front of the church, turned to the congregation, and said very simply, "Dear friends, all I have to say to you is this: There is more."

Our whole lives are a symbol of this truth, this reality. There is more. Every step of the way, we are being called to something new; it never ends. And every step of the way, something is lost and something is found. Something dies, and something greater is born.

Many theologians, following the lead of scientists like Teilhard de Chardin, believe that this is the story of evolution, which shows God working in the stuff of life's processes, even down to the cellular level, God continually working in all things, bringing everything to a higher good and a higher stage of consciousness. Every step of the way, God absorbing the losses and alterations and deaths, and fashioning from these something even greater.

And this constant change, which is what defines life, which we can see even on the microscopic level, is something the ego resists with all its might on the human, personal level, because most of us can't imagine dropping our nets and leaving our boats, unhooking from all that we THOUGHT was keeping us alive,... But this is why the most frequently repeated command in the Bible, spoken by angels and prophets and by God himself, ...the most frequently repeated command is "Do not be afraid."

Because there is more. And Jesus says, "Follow me. I am leading you into your True Life."