

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple on Sunday, January 23, 2011.

(Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23)

"And immediately they left their nets and followed him." A stranger walks along the shores of a great lake. He speaks to some of the fishermen, two sets of two brothers. He's not from their village of Capernaum. He's a new arrival from Nazareth. Rumor has it that his sudden relocation has something to do with the arrest of John the Baptist, a known political antagonist to the King and a gadfly to the religious authorities in Jerusalem. So there's a hint of danger about this new arrival. And yet there must have been something quite compelling about this man, this Jesus of Nazareth, Joseph's son. He speaks to Peter and Andrew as well as the sons of Zebedee, and they immediately drop their nets, leave their families, their livelihoods and follow him.

We cannot possibly know what those first disciples were thinking when they were called by Jesus to come take a walk with him. Could they have known? Could they have possibly known that this was much more than a momentary break from their workday? Could they have possibly known that God would break down their defenses, redirect their lives and through them, ordinary fishermen, reach out to all nations, all peoples of the world with a message of hope and reconciliation and forgiveness? I doubt they could have possibly known that they would move so quickly through those short years. Move through shouts of Hosanna on one day to cries of "Crucify him!" on another day. I think if Peter and Andrew, James and John had even a glimmer of what lay ahead of them, they might not have had the courage to step out that day. Were these steps of faith or just steps of curiosity? Was it a leap of faith in what might be in the future or just a certain weariness with the way things were? Who knows. But thanks be to God, these first disciples took a chance, dropped their nets, took their first steps and decided to follow Jesus.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine what it might be like going about your everyday business, your routine, your duties when an unexpected encounter might cause you to set aside the task at hand? A seeming interruption causes you to change direction for a few moments, and you look up a few years later and your entire life has changed and you have changed. Could you be one that would look up and hear God saying, "I want to give you a new direction for your life. I want to show you a new way of being in the world." Sometimes looking up from what we're doing is the first step of either reaffirming the goodness in the work at hand or maybe making sure that we are listening to God and maybe being willing to make a change, to accept an invitation to allow God to lead us into something new.

A rector's annual report -- note the segue -- the rector's annual report might be a way of asking disciples -- the curious, possible would-be disciples -- to step back, to drop your nets for a moment and look up and see what it is in our life together we need to reaffirm, maybe even think what there is in our life together that we need to change as we continue to give the witness of good news in Jesus Christ being lived out here in this wild crossroads of Durham, in the crossroads of life to our local community and to the world.

Almighty God has richly blessed our common life over the last year. And of course God's been doing that for many years at St. Luke's, 55 years come next month. For many years, God has called disciples and many of you have pulled up your nets and then recast them, leaving St. Philip's in some cases to come and be founding members of this parish. From its inception this parish has been blessed with the gifts of handymen, of artists, of painters, of teachers, of choppers in the kitchen. Everywhere you look in this parish, the gifts of ministry abound. And if you don't believe me, just look in the front of our parish directory. Look at the handbook and see all the committees and all the names and all the names of saints willing, maybe slightly reluctantly, to step forward and to take a share and a turn in leading the ministries of this church.

St. Luke's parish is growing in some very significant and healthy ways. And one of the most notable areas of growth for 2010 has been the beautiful music program. This church has always been blessed with good and dedicated musicians. Kaye Sloan, our relatively new music director, has taken what is good and made it even better. Just look how the choir has grown in number, in sound, in repertory, and in special occasions of offering music for Evensong at Pentecost, the conclusion of the Every Member Canvass. I can't think of another part of our parish where so many people are willing to gather week after week during the week for hours just to enhance our hour of worship. Choir, you and Kaye have given us a year of spectacular music memories. And we're looking forward to your creation of many more of those memories, as well as the addition of the St. Cecelia's Children's Choir in this coming year.

We are blessed that so many new folks are discovering our parish and calling St. Luke's home. Every Sunday brings us more visitors, more opportunities to proclaim the radical welcome of Jesus practiced here; all are welcome at St. Luke's. And this is not some politically correct sloganeering. It is in keeping with God's deepest desires, those desires announced by the prophets of old that we who would worship God must seek to be a house of prayer for all people. The light that has come into the world in Jesus Christ is a light for all nations, all nationalities, all kinds and all conditions of human beings. This is God's dream and this is the mission of this parish.

Our Bishop, Michael Curry, has given our diocese the theme of radical inclusivity in the name of Jesus, and he has given us the challenge that the face of our Diocese of North Carolina as a whole become more and more like the faces of the people of the State of North Carolina as a whole. Well, I wish Bishop Curry could have been with us at the Christmas Eve pageant. I was moved to tears when I looked over at our angel choir and saw a rainbow of young, earnest and dear faces, heads circled with tinsel, wings in various states of disarray singing the Christmas carols. All those angels in all the colors of the human race. I wish our bishop could have seen those children, faces that truly and widely reflect the diversity, the racial, ethnic, gender, cultural diversity of our great state, of our country, of our world.

And while these were small and subtle and radical and wonderful changes all by the grace of God, new people are here because the longer-time people, the fishermen and women of St. Luke's, are thinking about how to cast our nets differently. We are thinking hard and carefully about how to show hospitality and share the good news of Jesus Christ in new ways. Our greeters, our ushers, our teachers, our musicians, our preachers, our servers, our incredibly talented parish administrator, Kathy Barnes, our dedicated minister of hospitality, Carol Joyner,

we are all thinking and rethinking what it means to welcome others to our church and to welcome others into our journey in faith. So in 2010 we continued to be very blessed with an abundance of good people reaching out to others in hospitality.

But a year ago, when it came to the subject of finances, well, let's just say "abundance" was not the word that came to mind. A little over a year ago, our vestry realized that 2010 would be an exceptionally challenging year from a financial viewpoint. A scarcity of funds was not a fear, it was a fact. But the vestry did not let fear rule our hearts. Nor did they believe it would be enough to merely hope and pray that things would turn out okay. The vestry, along with the members of the Stewardship Committee, the Every Member Canvass Committee, the Finance Committee and many, many others prayed to heaven and then worked like heck!

As many of you will have heard in the Treasurer's Report, 2010 turned out to be a year of exceptionally good stewardship, both in terms of generous giving by the congregation as well as prudent and conservative management of our operations. We were prepared, we were willing to dip into our cash reserves by quite a significant sum to sustain the ministry of our church. As it turned out, we ended the year less than a thousand dollars off from a perfectly balanced budget. In other words, in the course of one uncertain year, this parish was able to close a gap of \$50,000. Amazing grace indeed.

But not only did 2010 go well for us financially, the pledging for 2011 increased by ten percent. At the end of December 2010, your vestry passed a budget that only needed a slight factor of balance from the reserves. I've made a bet with a certain member of the vestry that if we don't come out in the black at the end of this year, I'm cooking him dinner. And if we come out a teeny bit in the red -- no wait, if we come out to be in the red, I'm cooking him dinner, but I know he's going to end up cooking me dinner. He doesn't think we can do it and I know we can. So what a difference a year and a lot of faith has made.

And do you know how we did it? Careful education, clear communication. I do not think that we can thank or praise the vestry, the finance committee, the stewardship leaders enough. Hours of meetings and plans, kitchen table conversations, neighborhood dinners, Christian formation opportunities. We came together as a family, looked at our problems and laid out the challenge: If you believe in the people, the mission and ministry of this church, just please support it to the best of your ability. Remember that story of Jesus coming to the shore, the disciples have been out fishing all night, they've brought up their nets empty. Jesus said, "Put down those nets one more time." And they said, "Lord, we can't. We've been fishing all night. They're coming up empty." "Put down those nets one more time." We put down our nets one more time and we came up -- well, let's just say -- a great catch. For them it was a fish, for us it was financial resources.

This is a busy parish, stretched in many, many directions. But speaking of good stewardship, let's just take the example of the Green Team headed by John Wyman and Jim Hooker. Remember stewardship is not synonymous with fundraising. Stewardship is the acknowledgment that all that we have and all that we are comes from God. The work of the Green Team helps defend the earth and save us money. St. Luke's is considered a leader in the Diocese because of its various efforts to educate and advocate around issues of respecting and defending the integrity of God's

holy creation. I don't know that I've ever said this before, but I tell you, read the Junior Warden's report. It gives you an excellent example of someone who has valiantly and vigilantly drawn upon skills from a former life in fishing and put them into the service of God's kingdom now. We are so glad that something happened to cause the Wymans to pick up their stakes in Connecticut and then move down to North Carolina and cast their nets and their lots with St. Luke's, Durham.

We see more and more outstanding efforts in stewardship with the new landscaping and improved parking that surrounds our church. I think everybody knows how long and hard this process has been. And if you don't know, don't ask. Just enjoy it and be grateful, be so grateful that dedicated parishioners worked with work permits and construction crews and weather delays and endless amounts of obstacles and details to help us be a more visibly appealing, a more easily accessible location to give glory to God and to serve and welcome others. We're almost to the finish line, right, Bill Yarger? Just a little farther. And we thank Bill Yarger and his committee so deeply for the work that they've done for the last couple of years. And Lisa D'Amico and Randy Smith and their committee, the Site Planning, that happened for years and years before that.

But there's more to celebrate. Taking care of business at St. Luke's refers to far more than money matters. The business of St. Luke's is caring for others. And as always, we are blessed by many, many members who make it their business to take care of others, whether it's the Eucharistic visitors, the pastoral care providers, the hospitality coordinators. We care to welcome folks in, we care to go seek them out, whatever their need may be, but we could use some more help. Taking care of business means reaching out to others in need; others who may or may not be members of our parish, but certainly have a claim upon our compassion and upon our solidarity. Interfaith Hospitality Network, casseroles for Urban Ministries of Durham, household supplies for veterans here in Durham, all kinds of support for Holy Cross School in Belize, collections of school supplies, shoes, coats. The list goes on and on. I would not dare to try to mention all of those ministries, but I do want to highlight one.

For quite a few years Edith Keene has been quietly and effectively coordinating our participation in the Interfaith Hospitality Network. This is a terrific program of direct ministry to homeless families with children. As I'm sure you are all aware, homelessness among families with children is on the rise. All shelters have waiting lists, even the emergency shelters. Everyone who participates in IHN finds it well organized and fulfilling. Once upon a time, our parish hosted an entire week of family hospitality in our own parish hall. But over the years our participation has declined. We are now partners with Westminster Presbyterian Church. And in fact, it's become harder and harder even to recruit volunteers for the 48 hours of our own hospitality slot of working with IHN for a week at a time. Edith and I are devising some new ways to try to appeal to your assistance in this ministry. But you should know that the possibility exists that St. Luke's may be forced to withdraw from this effort. And if this be so, so be it because it is certainly clear that we must be careful with our stewardship of time and talent. But let us also be prayerful about it.

There is really no way to mention and give credit where credit is due to all the outreach ministries of this parish. But I'm going to take one opportunity to thank publicly our deacon, the

Reverend Jan Lamb, who keeps a finger on the pulse of most of the outreach efforts of this parish. Jan, it was not easy to get along without you for almost six months in 2010 while you were serving the church in Belize. Your absence then makes your presence now all the sweeter. As a deacon of the church you create many bridges; you connect us to the needs of the world. We are grateful for the relationships you are helping us to sustain with Holy Cross. We are grateful for the relationships you are helping us build with our newest neighbors whose native language is not English. And we are very excited about the NetsforLife initiative that you are helping to head up for our diocese. You know, I don't have the power to declare very much. I can declare people married. I can declare people forgiven. But I am going to dare to declare that I believe support for NetsforLife, this effort which can save tens of thousands of lives through purchasing mosquito netting, I declare this to be one of the top priorities for our parish in this coming year. Jan, help us to see what to do and how to do it, and I know this parish will rise to the occasion.

The role of the deacon is to point us out the door into the real world into the real needs. The role of our priests is to point us to the real presence of Christ in the sacraments of the church. Priests lift up their hands in gestures of encouragement, of pardon, and of blessing. Jim Craven and Joe Hensley do this beautifully. Sunday after Sunday, and really day after day, the two of you "lift up our hearts" to the Lord. Jim, you, in your steady, warm and endearing way, you provide this parish with so much comfort and joy. Jim, you radiate love and acceptance, sometimes gift wrapped in a good bit of teasing and jest. Jim, we are blessed by everything you do: your preaching, your officiating, your humor, your wisdom. And folks, by the way, you do know, right, that Jim and Jan are non-stipendiary, which is church speak for saying they don't get paid? They truly do their work for the love of God.

But then there's Joe Hensley. I just want to ask you, Joe, is there anything you can't do well? I have to tell you, I was a little more than relieved that the wheels did not fall off the cart while you took your sabbatical. And I am little more than worried that the cart may actually run more smoothly while I am away on sabbatical. Even so, I am grateful to God that I have found such a talented and dedicated partner in ministry. You, along with Jan and Jim, are more than willing and able to help carry the load of loving and nurturing this parish family. And Joe, we are especially grateful to you for your leadership in the ministry to and for our youth and children and for your efforts as chaplain to the St. Luke's School. It seems to me that the children and youth of this parish are wonderfully alive in the Spirit. And I do mean "wonder-full." Thanks to you and the teachers of Godly play and all of our Sunday school teachers, our youth and our children are invited to "wonder" about their faith and to be full of wonder and awe for all that God has done, is doing and will do for them in their lives. If any of you had a chance to look behind the scenes at the Christmas pageant or the Feast of Lights, you would have seen the flurry of life in parents and volunteers and advisors, all working and perhaps even a bit of fretting on the part of the pageant director, all wrapped up in love for the children and youth of this parish.

In this so-called rector's report, I have merely referenced a handful of examples of the innumerable acts of discipleship carried out by all of you. And where does the rector fit into all this? Well, you know me. I like to try to get my hand in just a little bit of everything. But hopefully my hand has been one of encouragement and support and not interference. I have a particular love and passion for formation events, for education and teaching and shaping our

lives and I give thanks to Barbara Longmire and the Adult Formation Committee for the great offerings of this last year. What a wonderful committee that is. But I will tell you the truth: 2010 was a hard year. After five years of serving as your rector, I'm a little tired. I am not burned out in the least, but I am indeed looking forward to a period of rest and restoration during my sabbatical this spring. But I am very much intending and looking forward to continuing as your rector, refreshed as I will be, for many years to come.

My friends, there is just so much to celebrate about our life together and this great call to follow Jesus. We have to have the wisdom to hear what God is saying and the courage to go where Christ is calling us. Most of all, may we continue to be blessed by the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to join hands with one another and do this as a parish family.

I want to conclude this rector's report by saying aloud the names of those whose lives we've celebrated this year but who we see no longer: Paul Scagnelli, Martha Pats Morehead, Maureen Williams, Ed Ribet, Dick Riddle, Dorothy Clark, Marjorie Pruett, Frank DePasquale. Even though they have left this life and this world, they leave behind a legacy of discipleship for us to follow. But more importantly, our lives remain joined with their lives in the communion of saints, which by the power of the Holy Spirit and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ brings us again with them to this table. May their souls, may our souls, may the souls of all the departed not just rest in peace but continue to lift up our voices, our hearts and our joys in singing with those angels and archangels around the heavenly table, around this heavenly banquet. Amen.