

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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172nd Annual Meeting of the Congregation

On The Road

Matthew 4:20

The arrest of John the Baptist created a crisis for all who were associated with him. Everyone knew that John's arrest could signal a crackdown by Herod targeting John's followers and associates. Many of them saw this as the time to cut back on their activities in order to stay out of the public eye and avoid persecution.

Jesus rejected this conventional wisdom. He did not see this as a time to retreat. Instead he went into Galilee to launch his own ministry. Galilee was certainly not a safe place for friends of John the Baptist. Herod's dictatorial control over Galilee was tighter than it was anywhere else. Jesus was traveling directly into the darkness of Herod's tyrannical reign.

Matthew sees it as a fulfillment of prophecy for Jesus to begin his ministry in this dangerous province. Matthew recalls the imagery of Isaiah 9 which names Galilee as the victim of a historical catastrophe. The prophet looks for the coming of a messiah who will bring light into that place of darkness. Matthew takes that imagery and applies it to the darkness of Herod's rule. Matthew believes that Jesus goes where the need is most desperate.

It is in the darkness of Galilee that Jesus finds the brothers Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Without the benefit of a formal introduction Jesus calls these fishermen to follow him. Matthew tells us that "Immediately, they left their nets and followed him (Matthew 4:20)."

The Greek word that is translated "follow" in this passage is rooted in the word for road. This language informs their understanding of their new vocation. The disciples do not understand all the implications of the call they have just received. But one thing is clear to them. Jesus has not promised to solve all their problems on the spot. He is offering them a road on which to travel. It may be a long journey with many hardships and much uncertainty. They are willing to make the journey in the hope that the light he brings will illumine the darkness where they live.

Our 172nd Annual Meeting today reflects almost 173 years of this congregation's journey with Christ. The Annual Report provided today is a memoir of one year of that journey. It is the story of our efforts to be faithful to that calling. These efforts are too often feeble and sometimes inadequate. But above all it is the story of how God has been faithful to us.

The nature of this journey is evoked in a letter written a few years ago by a young man who was dying. The letter was in response to a note he received from a woman who claimed that he could be healed of his disease if his faith were strong enough. The implication was that if he should die his death would be the result of his own failure to believe. Though he was very weak when he received the note he wanted to respond. He dictated these words for his brother to write down and pass on to the woman:

I share your faith in the almighty power of God to heal and sustain us. There may be times though when God's greatest miracle is not the miracle of physical healing, but the miracle of giving us strength in the face of suffering. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12 that he prayed God would remove a thorn in the flesh, but God answered simply, "My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect in weakness..." In this world we will sometimes weep, suffer, and die. I sincerely hope that if my illness takes my life, no one will see it as a failure of my faith in God. I do not claim to understand God's will, but I know that I am in God's hands, in life and in death (Scott Bader-Saye, *Christian Century*, July 10, 2007, page 29).

Jesus does not come to provide us with a safe haven. He comes to offer us a road through the darkness. On this road we are sustained by the One who is our light and our salvation.