

**The Rector's Thirteenth Annual Address: St. Francis Church, Holden**  
**The Rev. Richard M. Simpson**

*When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum, by the sea...*

He moved. Jesus left his home town of Nazareth to make a new home, in a new place about twenty miles away: Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee (which is really a lake.) Matthew seems to be suggesting that the arrest of John the Baptist was the trigger for this move. Perhaps Jesus was justifiably worried that as someone who had spent a fair amount of time in public with John, he had been put on a government watch list. Or maybe he was just tired of the whispering in Nazareth that had never let up, not even three decades after his birth, about who his daddy was. Maybe the rents were cheaper in Capernaum. Whatever his motivations—the narrator tells us that after John's arrest, Jesus moved to a place *nearer to the Lake*. Only with 20/20 hindsight can Matthew go on to say that this was meant to be, that it fulfilled the words of the prophet, Isaiah, as the light now shined in the darkness of Galilee of the Gentiles, across the Jordan in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. As a Jew, writing for Jews, that's a big deal to Matthew; for him Scriptures are being fulfilled all over the place. But that kind of theological reflection almost always comes *after the fact*. Matthew can say this because he knows how the story turns out and because he knows what a turning point this move turned out to be not only in Jesus' life, but even more for the people with whom it brought him into contact: people like Peter and Andrew and the Zebedee boys.

It's really not that different in our own lives, is it? Often it's much easier to look back and see how God was at work over time than it is in the present. Like Jesus, we may move for any number of reasons: work or school or maybe because we need to be closer to family (or perhaps further away!) Only later, when we look back upon what unfolded there, can we see how we have been changed. Only then do we dare to say things like: "*it was meant to be...it was part of God's plan for me...*"

I moved to Scotland for my junior year of college almost on a whim: I saw no visions and heard no angels, and I was not guided there by a star. In fact, my reasons for choosing to study there and not elsewhere were rather trivial; among other things I naively thought it might improve my golf game just breathing in that air. Still, in hindsight it was surely a place of discovery and epiphanies for me. Who can say whether or not I was changed for the better by that decision? But I was certainly changed for good. My whole life is different because of what happened during the course of those nine months in the mid 1980s. Hathy and I met on the very first day at the international student orientation, when Prince William and Kate Middleton were still in diapers! As we approach our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary I can't help but to see the hand of God at work in all of it. It was also in St. Andrews that I began to get some clarity about my call to ordination. Maybe that part could have (and would have) happened anywhere. But the point is that it unfolded *somewhere*. It happened there, by the North Sea, influenced most especially by the people who became a part of my life there: Hathy and Jorg and Chris and John and the Anglican chaplain there whose name I can no longer even remember; we just called him "Smiley" because he seemed to be a gentle soul who was always smiling. A lot of things had happened before then and have happened since; but so much came together for me there, by that Sea. It is in each moment, in the present tense, that God offers us infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. But sometimes our willingness to receive that gift is increased when we have been

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jarred out of our familiar surroundings and find ourselves in a new place. We see things differently, through a new set of lenses; as if for the first time.

Jesus moved from Nazareth to *K'pher Nahum*, near the Sea. That's what they called it when I went there a year ago to walk the streets, including the ruins of the synagogue and what is said to have been Peter's house. Literally, "the village of Nahum." At the synagogue in Nazareth, where Jesus unrolled the scroll to read from the prophet Isaiah one Sabbath day, everyone surely knew his name. But it's not hard to imagine both the freedom of anonymity and the nervousness of being alone when Jesus first walked into the synagogue in *K'pher Nahum* as a stranger—a newcomer. Moving is always a little scary, even when it is also exciting. I think our personalities shine through when we move: for some everything new—home, school, job, church, synagogue, grocery store—is better. Others will, for quite some time, feel a sense of nostalgia and tend to compare their new experiences unfavorably to what was so comfortable and familiar for so long. There is the process of making new friends, of finding someone who can cut your hair, a doctor, a new favorite restaurant.

Matthew seems to be suggesting that this move leads Jesus into a deeper awareness of the ministry to which God is calling him. That may sound funny to some of our ears, especially if we have been taught to think of Jesus only as the Second Person of the Trinity. But the Gospels, and the tradition, are very clear about Jesus' full humanity, about his questions and struggles and even doubts. Like us in every way (save sin), Jesus, too, needed prayer and discernment of God's will before he could do God's will. At some point after this move to *K'pher Nahum*, he got the clarity he needed, and then the chutzpah, to finally call out one day as he walked along the lake: "*hey, you guys—follow me. I'll make your fish for people.*"

In the calling of these two sets of brothers, we are off and running. Jesus and these four disciples and indeed the world will never be the same again. Jesus public ministry begins. But it is never only about him. It's about the Reign of God, and that Reign of God seems to require a community of disciples willing to be light, and salt, and yeast for the sake of the world; not just in and around Galilee during Jesus' earthly ministry but even now, in this time and place, and to the end of the ages. After these four accept Jesus' invitation to join him in this work of proclaiming the Reign of God—he takes them up to a high place overlooking the Lake: the Mount of the Beatitudes. There they begin a training program for discipleship, because it turns out that this calling that has come to them by the shores of Galilee marks the beginning of a life-long journey. Over the course of these next five weeks, as this Epiphany season continues to unfold, we'll join them on that Mount of the Beatitudes and "listen in" to hear what he has to say. But all of that in due course...

*Like Simon and Andrew, James and John: you and I have been called by name.* It may not be as clear to us as the voice of Jesus calling out by the Sea of Galilee. But we are, nevertheless, each of us, called by name in Holy Baptism. And then, with God's help (and with the help of a faith community like this one) we begin that long process of growing into the full stature of Christ. It's reassuring to me that the disciples are portrayed as people who make mistakes, who have lots of questions, and who don't initially understand what it is Jesus expects or even demands of them. Jesus sets the bar high. But there always seems to be enough grace to fill in the gaps when they mess up, and that is truly good news for people like us. We come here week after week to

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meet this same Jesus: this living Christ whom we meet not just in memory but in the present tense, through Word and Sacrament. And that same process of formation and (re)formation that began by the Sea of Galilee and continued on the Mount of the Beatitudes continues to unfold here each weekend: in church school classrooms and across the parking lot at St. Clare House and at Rite 13 and J2A gatherings and at Bible studies and discussion groups and at the vestry table and at committee meetings and in the sacristy and when knitters get together to knit prayer shawls. Like Peter and Andrew and James and John, we are invited on a journey: *come, follow me.*

This is the weekend of our Annual Meeting. This sermon, like all sermons, means to proclaim the good news. But it also serves a secondary function this weekend as a kind of Annual Address—my thirteenth as rector here. My written report, prepared for this Annual Meeting, speaks of some of the specifics of what has happened here in the past year. But it's helpful to me at least, and perhaps for some of you, to sometimes step back and take a wider look, to try to reflect on the larger questions of who we are, and what this place is about and how God is working in our lives through the ministries that unfold here. It helps, I think, to step back and reflect a bit on purpose and vision and mission. And it seems to me that our parish Vision Statement captures well what I've been trying to speak about:

*Living into the Baptismal Covenant, we are striving to grow into the full stature of Christ. We are committed to common prayer, life-long Christian formation, mission to the world, and grateful stewardship as we live out Jesus' command to love God and our neighbor.*

From month to month and from year to year, our short and long-term goals will change to reflect changing circumstances. There will be accomplishments and some disappointments along the way. Sometimes we'll wander for a while in the wilderness. But the Mission, and the Vision remain; they call us back when we get off-track. They help us to keep our eyes on the prize: on the larger issues of what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ in this time and place.

Whether or not you stay for the meeting, I hope you will take a look at the budget and the reports that have been prepared for this weekend. Budgets are about more than numbers. Whether we are talking about our family budgets, or government budgets or church budgets, they force us into choosing our priorities. They force us to ask ourselves what really matters, and what defines us? *A budget is a plan for ministry.* Underneath all of those numbers are words, and stories, and all of those annual reports are about trying to put words and stories to the numbers. Behind (and beneath) those annual reports are real people; and behind (and beneath) those real people, you will see the face of God.

Some people like to keep their spirituality far away from things like budgets and the “institutional” side of parish life. But I think that's a mistake. The very heart of our faith, especially during the season of Epiphany, is this bold claim that “the Word has become flesh.” This season is an opportunity to reflect on how Christ is made manifest in our lives, even in places as ordinary as a stable in a small Palestinian village. If the holy can be uncovered in such a mundane place as that, then surely God can be uncovered here.

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No congregation can do everything, so we must choose to do something. I know congregations that spend a lot more money on music than this church does. Some of them (including the parish I served for four years before coming to St. Francis) pay their choir members, or at least the section leaders. There are certain expectations in such choirs that are very different from an all-volunteer music program. To be very honest, I'm not crazy about the whole idea of paid choirs and I am very proud of all that our volunteers accomplish here week after week, on both Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. My point is simply that you can look at a church budget (just as you can look at your own checkbook) and find out a lot there about what a church really believes; what its priorities are. These are choices that vestries make, consciously or unconsciously; perhaps bound to "tradition" or even boldly moving in new directions. There are churches in our diocese that spend a much higher percentage of their budgets on buildings that belong to another era of the church's life and work than we do. Just walking into a place like All Saints' or St. Matthew's in Worcester makes you aware that the oil companies get a lot more from them than they do from us, even with three properties to heat.

On the other hand, very few parishes in this diocese choose to pay youth ministers or church school coordinators or have two clergy on staff. Our budget reflects our commitment to Christian education. It's in synch with our stated values. If we had an infinite amount of money we'd do it all. But we don't, and so we focus on the ways that help us more faithfully live out of, and into, our particular "Mission and Vision." If you look at the financial reports and the mission reports, you can't help but to see that there is also a very strong commitment here at St. Francis to mission beyond these walls, both locally and globally. That, too, defines who we are and what matters to us. In a season when many congregations are passing deficit budgets, the story behind a balanced budget that has a 15% increase for mission and outreach is something to be proud of, and thankful for. But it also tells the story rather dramatically of how we really are living into that vision to be "grateful stewards."

For us, as for those first disciples by the Sea of Galilee, ministry is about those particular times and places when our encounter with the living Christ intersects with a world in need. The week of our Annual Meeting is not merely a bureaucratic requirement. It's not just something the diocese *makes* us do. It's an opportunity for us to step back and reflect not only on what has happened in the past year and on where we have seen God at work in our lives and in this congregation, but to recommit ourselves to follow Christ, to fish for people, to be goaded by, and guided by, God's Holy Spirit as the journey continues.

Matthew, in writing his gospel, noticed that when Jesus moved from Nazareth to *K'pher Nahum* and then called Peter and Andrew and James and John to fish for people, that this rather mundane event unleashed a chain of events that would change the world. He then connected what he saw and experienced with those strange old words of Isaiah's, which now suddenly came to life for him and became present tense. By God's grace, that happens every now and again for us as well, as the Scriptures suddenly come to life for us here, and we are able to see and hear what God is doing in our lives and in our church and in the world around us. As we come together in this place to seek and serve Christ, may we find and be found by him: in the bread we break and in the work we are sent to do in Christ's name. *Come, let's fish for people!*