

Epiphany 3 – Follow Me

Rev. Dr. Les Martin

Amos 1:1-11, Psalm 139:1-13, 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, Matthew 4:12-22

I grew up here over in Oak Ridge and was ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal church in Morristown, Tennessee in 1994. For the last 10 years I've been living in Nigeria and that's one reason it's nice to say I'm just less because protocol indicates, at least in that culture, that I should tell you that I am the venerable doctor, Leslie Martin, the canon theologian of the Diocese of Pankshin and bring you greetings on behalf of my bishop, the Rt Revd Dr Olumuyiwa O. Ajayi. He really does greet you.

I've lived there a long time. While I was there, I found my wife Kate, and when we found ourselves back here five months ago, we found you and you've been a home to us during a very challenging time. The two of us are now three. And at 54, I kind of feel like Zechariah when he heard about John. I'm full of wonder and speechless, but here we are and it's good to be here. Now the only thing I'll warn you is I have for 10 years been preaching in Nigeria, so I'm going to watch the clock. I hope it'll do some good and if I'm a little too loud, I'm not used to small buildings anymore, I'm used to shouting. Bear with me. Let us pray. Brethren, I have resolved to know among you nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. Lord, make that true now in the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the gospel this morning we hear that Jesus has moved. It's not just like me and it's not just like he's moved from one place to another. The scripture tells us that he has now made his home in a new place. He's left Nazareth. He will begin his ministry in the town of Capernaum, in the region of Zebulon and Naphtali.

Scripture doesn't waste words, so this is not trivia. It's important context for us to be able to understand the work of Jesus Christ and the power of the gospel. Because like all of us, Zebulon and Naphtali have a history. They are two tribes with lands in the northern kingdom, who, by the time of Jesus, have suffered long and hard all the way back to the time of the judges. They have been tempted by idolatry and pagan worship again and again and again. They've suffered invasion by foreign armies to the point that after the war with Assyria, the deportations and exile have gone on for so long that the area was almost depopulated. Barren. And what was left was not good.

So by Jesus' time the region is repopulated, but it's largely full of mixed race people, which is not too acceptable to the Jews. They have a synchronistic religion, a mix of religious beliefs that they picked up abroad that they picked up from their pagan neighbors with a little bit Judaism mixed in still. Now, again, I want to say this is not just trivia. The situation of Zebulon and Naphtali isn't just some sad, tragic history, poor guys. No, it's judgment.

Because it was not always so. The state of Zebulon and Naphtali in Jesus' time is best understood by returning to the guy who wrote our first reading, the prophet Amos. Amos is the earliest prophet we think whose writings we have written down and ominously his name, Amos comes from the root word, Amar, which means to lift up, to carry, to take away. Look what's coming. He came along during the reign of King Jeroboam II. It was a long and prosperous reign, the good times. He came to a people in the northern kingdoms who had no anxieties particularly, but rather dreams of greatness and a thirst for pleasure.

A very different land than the one that is to come. What happened? Well, through Amos, God said, no to them. "No." He said no to their pagan worship. He said no to the corruption of their government. He said no to their greed and indifference towards the poor, all of it. Their glory and shame would be

carried away and not because they were strangers. He says, "No, you're my people and so I'm going to judge you. You can't rest on who you were. You can't rest on your laurels. Something's going to change and it's not going to be good for you."

Today's portion, Amos 3:1-11 is his poetic reminder. It's in poetry and it's really, really well written, but if you look at it closely, it's a poetic reminder that effects have causes. Effects have causes. Why does a lion roar? Because he found prey. In our modern parlance, we might say that what Amos is telling us is that actions have consequences. When you do what you do, you get what you get. So by the time of Jesus, Zebulon and Naphtali, having indulged in pagan worship, having indulged in corruption, having indulged in injustice, are a people sitting in great darkness. It is to this people that Jesus moves, he sets up his home and he begins to say, "Repent." Now one sermon could end right there and I could not worry about preaching long like a Nigerian. One sermon could end right there. I could say it's a sermon about a judged people and a God of second chances, a do better next time sermon. I've heard it, I've probably preached it. Problem is I don't believe it's a gospel sermon anymore.

It's something else, something that keeps us far too weighed down. Which is why I think we need our second piece of context today. And we don't have to look in the Bible necessarily for that when that context is right here. It's the context of human existence. I don't know if you're aware of this, but life is hard. External circumstances can crush our successful lives. Kate and I have seen it. War terrorism, refugee crisis. May look a little different here, but you've seen it too. The cancer diagnosis, the job loss, life is hard, and if life is hard, our internal circumstances are far worse.

We sin. In the words of the Nigerian book of common prayer, we sin through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault. We sin through negligence, we're careless. We don't mean to, but we just do. We sin through weakness. We lack willpower to live the lives that we want to live, that we know we want to live and we sin through our own deliberate fault. Words like utterly corrupted and totally depraved are not so popular today, but the older I get, the more I see the truth. When I'm trying to get a night's sleep and my unborn son kicks me, I see the truth.

So here's the problem with that sermon about a second chance. See, I don't know about you, but I don't need a second chance or a third chance to get things right if I'm honest, because I'll just mess it up a second time, a third time, a fourth time, I simply won't get it right. In the words of AA's first step, I am powerless. Now, it may not be alcohol, but it's certainly life and sin. I'm powerless. The truth is I don't need a fresh start. I don't need to dust myself off and start all over again. I need rescuing.

Amen.

God, I need rescuing. And I bet I'm not alone. Now, even if you're not resonating with me, there's someone who is. This is what Paul is getting at in Romans 7:14-24. I'll give you the Martin paraphrase. Paul says, "I don't really understand myself."

We can stop right there, but he goes on. He says, "There are these good things that I know are good and they, they're what I want to do and I set out to do them and suddenly I find I'm doing the things that I know are bad and that I don't want to do. And the things that are bad that I don't want to do, well, those are the very things I do." And you can hear his anguish if you look through the stilted words of the Bible. He says, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He doesn't need a second chance. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

We'll come back to that. Because the deliverance isn't found in the second chance. The deliverance isn't found in more willpower. The deliverance isn't found in anything within this body. It's a deliverance from outside. Paul cries out, "Thanks be to God that for those who are in Christ Jesus, there is no condemnation act." That's good news and you may be tracking with me so far, but we got to talk about human existence a little more because this sounds real good to our ears except that we resist it.

I mean, this is about the call of the disciples. Shouldn't we be talking about discipleship? See, we live in a self-help pull yourself up by your bootstraps, life coach, productivity planner kind of culture, especially in America. I can do it. Just give me the space, I can do it. This time will be different. And there is that word, repent. You're messing up Dr. Les. What about that word repent? What are we to make of that? Well, let's have some more context. Repent comes from the Greek word metanoia, and for 1200 years the Vulgate Bible that Jerome translated into the Latin told us that that word repent right there today in Matthew 4:17, Jerome did the best he could. He translated it and he told us that that word meant, do penance. Repent, do penance.

In other words, do something. Don't just sit there, do something better yourselves. Get busy. Well, that sounds a lot like that second chance. And again, according to the context of human existence, we have a problem. Now, the scholar Erasmus, by the 16th century studying the original languages found that that really wasn't the best translation of the Greek or the Hebrew. Repent wasn't so much do penance, do something as it was return. Be restored. Dr. Luther ever the guy who wanted to make sure that God got the verbs and that we were the recipient wanted to push it even further. He said that to repent is to be returned, to be turned around, to be restored. See, God gets the verb.

That's good.

It's not something I do, but something that is done unto me. It is not so much that I repent as it is the case that I am repented. Now we're getting somewhere because this understanding of repentance fits much better with the wider biblical context as to the work of Jesus in Zebulon and Naphtali, what he's doing there. We can look at two examples real quickly. Matthew today quotes Isaiah 8:23-9:2, you see it there in the reading. The land of Zebulon and Naphtali who walked in darkness have seen a great light. But I wish they'd gone a little further.

I wish they'd gone a little further because listen to, listen to verse 9:4. Matthew leaves off around 9:2. This is Isaiah 9:4, you can check me. Going on, he says, talking about God, "You have broken the bar on their shoulders and the rod of their oppressor as you did in the day of Midian." He goes to Zebulon and Naphtali not to say to try harder but to break the yoke, to break the bond, to shatter the rod. It is Jesus who does it, not us. We also ought to consider what other evangelists tell us about what Jesus is doing in Capernaum.

Matthew gives us the large statement, the kind of mission statement. Jesus is up there saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand." But that's the cliff notes version. What does he say? Well, in Capernaum, he gives his first sermon. It's found in Luke 4:17-21. And lo and behold, he's quoting Isaiah again. He says, "The spirit of the Lord is on me because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives in recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And if to put a bullet point at the end of it, his whole sermon is one sentence. "Today, these words have been fulfilled in your hearing." And he sits down. "Here I am freedom for the captives, recovery to the sight to the blind, freedom for oppressors the year of the Lord's favor." It is Jesus who does it, not us. He

is the repentor. We're in epiphany tide, that extension of Christmas where we continue to reflect on the continuing revelation of Jesus. Who is he for Zebulon, Naphtali, for us?

Who is he for the fisherman he calls today? He is the repentor, the restorer, the one who does for us what we cannot ever do for ourselves no matter how hard we try. To be a fisherman in Palestine was difficult, undignified work. Fishermen were considered rude and uncultured. Even Cicero the Roman orator says that to be a fisherman is one of the most shameful occupations. These are the people in Zebulon and Naphtali who attract Jesus' attention. And he walks up to the fisherman and says, what? Work harder, better yourself, try again, maybe do some night classes.

No. He repents them. Restores them to their original design and dignity with two simple words, "Follow me." Let's expand that a little. I see you tangled up in your nets. I see you who the society would overlook. I see you in this rough and challenging occupation. I see you. Follow me. So too, it is he who disentangles us from the nets of our lives. You heard it in the song. I'm sorry Lord for the thing I made it. We've gotten all tangled up. He disentangles us. He is, what did we learn last liturgical season? He is Emmanuel, Jesus, God with us, to be the God who saves us.

Now, don't worry, I know my context. I'm in east Tennessee where Christianity is still strong and I'm in a church of people who actually decided to get up this morning and come to church. I know you know this. But the problem is that's not the whole context is it? As I said, we're those self-help, life coach, productivity people. We think we can get things right. More than that, we can't believe that salvation can be that easy. I mean, there has to be something that we better do.

Now, we do things in our Christian life, of course, these fishermen who are called are going to become fishers of men, but until we get the priority straight, until we get the fact that God is the actor and we are the recipient deep in us, until we soak that in, all our work is going to be striving. It's going to be anxiety filled. It's going to be counterproductive. It's not going to come out of the fruit of the Spirit. It's not going to be the unique unforced rhythms of grace that are appropriate to each one of us.

Rather, it's going to be something we learned in the sermon on 10 tips for being a more productive Christian and it's going to break us again and again and again. That's why being here is so important, you know, gathering together. Before I was a Christian, I thought it was just kind of another shame thing, right? Go to church. But here, here is where we receive the antidote to that culture out there that says, try harder, work harder. Haven't you solved that yet? I mean, look at you. Here, in the liturgy, the truth of who Jesus is goes from something we know, and again, I know you know it, but to something we embody.

The word read and preached goes in our ears. Even thick stuffed up ears like mine. The sacrament of the altar, the bread and the wine, they go in me in a visceral way and they do an inside job. The gathered community can hold us accountable to the truth when they see us struggling with the fact that we're not perfect. They can remind us that we never had to be. Week after week we see, we hear, we taste, we are repented, we are restored. Jesus reveals himself as Isaiah told us today, to be the yoke breaker. He breaks the yoke that burdens us, our sin. He breaks the bar on our shoulders that weighs our life down, fear of death. And he snaps the rod of our oppression, that in this day and age seems to be the belief that we have to fix it all on our own. God is doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. That's the revelation we receive in word and sacrament today because Amos is right as far as he goes. Actions do have consequences, but if God is the actor, what are the consequences then?