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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 4:12-23

In an old episode of M*A*S*H -- second season or somewhere thereabouts -- just about the entire camp became deathly ill with the flu. Colonel Blake was not spared from the outbreak, either, and gave this episode some of its most memorable moments. With his mind in a haze, he reflected on his condition by imagining what it would be like were he not there...

Look at me, sick in Korea. Boy, if I was back home in Bloomington, Illinois, my wife would be taking care of me, leaning over my bed with her hair in curlers, cold cream on her face and those chipped fingernails. The kids playing ball up against the side of the house. My dog at the foot of my bed having an accident. Boy, am I glad I'm here.

When Colonel Blake comes to the conclusion that being in a war zone is preferable to being at home (in this instance), that's really saying something.

We also might make an observation about being far away from home...or far away from anything, for that matter. If one is called from some distance away to travel that distance, what is one's reaction? Speaking as someone who gets a charge out of seeing different places, I typically am excited about the prospect. But sometimes people don't have the good fortune of picking up and going someplace fun, like the aforementioned Henry Blake in Korea, or any number of servicemen and women who put their lives on the line in faraway places. For those who have a bit more say as to where they go, a faraway place can be like a retreat where one can regroup and find refreshment, or perhaps discover new opportunities and challenges while, at the same time, being freed from the baggage of the past.

It's fascinating to note that, in today's Gospel text, Jesus goes out into some of the more desolate parts of the Holy Land to proclaim the kingdom. It would appear that, while the word had already gotten out in and around Jerusalem, there were many other places where it hadn't. So Jesus withdraws from any sort of urban center and heads to then-distant lands. (Keep in mind that Jesus' hometown of Nazareth was about eighty miles from Jerusalem, which would've been quite a journey when traveling by donkey or by foot.) But why bother? Isn't it a waste of Jesus' time (and breath) to preach in such backwaters? One might argue no. The people in the hinterlands need to hear Jesus just as much as the people in the cities. Indeed, his message is for all to hear.

But isolated areas, to this day, tend to be undesirable places for people to go. When I was in graduate school, I wrote my scholarly project on medical care for underserved populations, and discovered (rather unsurprisingly, I suppose) that it was difficult to get physicians to practice in rural areas because they were undesirable places to live and work. So even primary care, which is the backbone of public health, was scarce to non-existent where it was often most needed. Similarly, churches have a difficult time finding clergy if they happen to be in out-of-the-way places or, perhaps, in "flyover country." Typically, a big city is thought to have the amenities, cultural opportunities, and ease of access to airports and other transportation hubs that usually aren't found in rural areas, and if one expects those sorts of things, one may find the adjustment to rural living rather difficult. Speaking personally, I moved from a house in the country outside a town of 250 to Warsaw, so, needless to say, I tend to adapt well to places where others might not adapt so well...

The point should be clear, though: Wherever one goes, a need is always there. And, particularly in more far-flung places, the need is often most acute. In

today's Gospel text, Jesus points us toward the less-glamorous locales, perhaps as a way to stretch our scope a bit. We may be drawn to share Jesus in the nicer zip codes, so to speak, but what about those that are far away, or run down, or forgotten? This challenge comes to us (conveniently) on the Sunday of our Annual Meeting, at which we look upon our accomplishments of the previous year and envision how we might continue or improve upon them in the future. Which zip codes are we being led to? What sorts of calls await us in 2020? Are we spiritually, emotionally, and physically prepared for what lies ahead?

In this faraway region, along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus discovers Simon, Andrew, James, and John -- the fishermen who become Jesus' first four disciples. Both Simon and Andrew and James and John seem to respond to Jesus' call quite readily; in fact, the Evangelist records that they did so "immediately." Not surprisingly, this can be lifted up as an example for us, that we might respond to Jesus' call with such quickness and enthusiasm. But, beyond that, let's think again of the place in which all this happens. The Lord discovers and chooses his disciples in a rather unlikely place...and they happen to be rather unlikely people as well (common fishermen). I can't help but think of this as God's own mysterious way of undermining everyone's assumptions. We assume that God will choose only the best and the brightest. We assume that God will send the Messiah to cozy up to the powerful and conquer with their help. We assume that great things happen only in centers of political and economic might.

To those assumptions, I say, "Look at the modest backgrounds and careers of the disciples, look at the power structures Jesus challenged, and look at where Jesus was born!"

Thus, to say to Jesus' call "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not in with the right group of people" or "I'm not from the big city" is to miss the point completely. Jesus can discover people anywhere and have them "fish for people" just like he said to Simon and Andrew. The challenge for us is to have the openness and willingness to plunge ourselves immediately into our Lord's work, because, if anything, we tend to be cautious people (which isn't necessarily a bad thing). We might not plunge into something immediately if it looks sketchy, foolish, or suspicious, which naturally makes us wonder if the disciples -- if for a brief moment -- didn't have some reservations themselves. Yet, at the same time, could we also say that our Lord would never call us to sketchy, foolish, or suspicious pursuits? To be able to say that would be to have the kind of trust in the Lord that would make heeding his call possible.

And Jesus frames his disciples' call in language familiar to them, which undoubtedly lessened the likelihood of resistance from them. He says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" (Matthew 4:19b). They really won't be doing anything different...only the species will change! In this out-of-the-way place, Jesus snags some guys who are going to snag some more, and the reason why he went out of the way surely indicates his desire to gather all people in. Here, the fishermen's nets are going to be cast far and wide so that all may come to know the love, justice, and mercy that are the hallmarks of the coming kingdom.

Whether one is called to a faraway place or from a faraway place, it is one's duty and pleasure to emulate the openness and trust of the first disciples by laying down one's nets and applying one's skills to something new. You at St. Anne's have given me a little taste of that by calling me here. Let me remind you now, though, that God calls all his children -- whether ordained or not --

to fish for people, or to apply and reconfigure whatever it is that you were trained to do to gathering people into his fold. Consider God's calling a reminder as we go forth into our Annual Meeting that our worth collectively depends not on dollars and cents but on the number of people who know the love of Jesus Christ because of us. When we fish for people, this is what we do.

If Jesus has not already done so, he will, as with Simon, Andrew, James, and John, find you in (perhaps) a faraway or unsuspecting place and call you to apply and reconfigure that which you were trained to do to bringing people into God's family. This may not necessarily mean relocating to another part of the country or world, though; it may simply mean doing something out of your comfort zone. Some of this may also involve visioning the various ways you might cast your nets into the community and world that you maybe haven't yet explored. But that vision, above all, comes from God, too...

Lastly, whether you're far away from home or not, know that God has called you here for a reason. Maybe if you're far away from home, you feel "at home" here. Maybe this place is the kind of place that offers the service opportunities and social activities that allow you to more fully appreciate God's gifts of charity, mercy, and friendship. Maybe you feel a certain closeness to God through our liturgy, music, and receiving the Sacrament. Whatever the case may be, God called you here for reasons mentioned just now or, perhaps, something else. With that in mind, let us head into our Annual Meeting with a sense of the reason we're here and why others who aren't here might gain interest in that.

And, with Colonel Blake, may each of us say, "Boy, am I glad I'm here!"

Amen.