

In some places,
the rector's sermon on the day
of the Annual Meeting
was a sort of "State of the Parish Address."

It was a look back
over the previous year,
touching on any major events
in the life of the congregation.
The preacher might also
acknowledge and thank
parishioners who had been
particularly involved or helpful.

Often, towards the end,
the rector might offer a vision for
or at least a glimpse of
what might be coming
in the next year.

I've tried this approach
a few times,
but I've never been
really happy with it.

To do it,
you either end up ignoring
the Gospel for the day,
or trying to make it fit
with what you want to say.

So I usually treat the sermon
like any sermon -
what is God saying to us today,
at the intersection of the Gospel
and our lives?

But with today's lessons,
we might be able to
answer that question faithfully,
and at the same time,
consider the State of our Parish.

We'll start with the Gospel -
which for us is good advice
pretty much any time -

Jesus has been baptized,
then taken by the Spirit into the wilderness
for 40 days of temptation,
and then our reading today picks up -

Jesus hears that JtB has been arrested,
and then he retreats first to Nazareth
and then to Capernaum,
a hundred miles or more from
where he was baptized
and tempted.

The journey would have taken him
Several days,
and you wonder what he was
thinking about as he made
his way north.

What was on his mind?

Matthew tells us
that when he arrived,
he then preached his first
sermon, and it was something -
short and to the point -

Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven
has come near.
We're given no further information
or context for his
exhortation,

But we can guess
that *this is what he was thinking about
on that long walk home.

He offers no explanation of what
people are to repent of.
Now, Remember, repent simply means,
to go in the other direction,
to turn around.

We usually think of it
as turning away from,
but could it also mean

to turn towards something new,
something different?

Maybe -

*if what he does *next is meant
to put some meat
on the bones of that sermon.

He finds two sets of fishermen,
Peter and Andrew,
and then James and John,
and says to them,
“Follow me,
and I will make you
fish for people.”

And they follow him,
immediately,
as Matthew tells it,
without hesitation,
or even a second thought.

So, maybe, in this moment,
repentance is about turning
towards discipleship,
towards being
a follower of Jesus.

If being a follower is what it means,
for the Kingdom of heaven
to come near to them,
then perhaps repentance,
is turning away from
not seeing the Kingdom,
not recognizing it
as the fulfillment of
God’s dream for creation.

Matthew then tells us
that Jesus goes throughout
The entire region -
Galilee of the Gentiles,
and land filled with people
from all over,
those inside the Covenant
and those without it -

He proclaims this Good News
to *anyone who would hear it -
the Kingdom of heaven has come near.

And this is where i see
the intersection between this Gospel
and the state of this congregation.

During the interview process -
and I'll admit i could be
way off base -
but it felt like y'all thought
you were lacking something,
that there was something
Really important that you needed
but didn't have.

Someone said to me,
We have all the pieces of the puzzle,
but we need someone to show us
how to put them together.

I'm not convinced that you do need that.
I think it's more a matter of
helping you see,
what you're already doing.

And what you're doing,
is answering Jesus' call,
to be his followers,

To proclaim the Good News
to anyone who will listen,
that the Kingdom of Heaven,
Has come near to them,
in the same way it has come
near to you.

In my first sermon I talked
about discernment,
and how it was less about
good decision-making
and more about being
aware of and responding to
God's call to us.

We always want to know
what's next -
what is God calling us to do
or to be,
with the idea that it must be
more or better or larger
than who we are right now.

In some ways,
that's partially true -
God seldom lets us just stay put
right where we are,
and just how we are.
We are called to follow, after all,
not just to stand still.

But if we are to hear clearly,
to respond faithfully to what
God might be calling us
to do or be,
we start by being as aware
as we can be,

Of where God is in our midst
right now,
of what God is already doing
among us,
of the ways we are already
living into God's dream
for us.

By the way,
we hear a lot of talk in the Church
about what God's will for us is -
and that's okay -

But i much prefer to think of it
as God's call to us,
or as God's dream for us.

God's will makes it sound
like it's already carved out
and set in immovable stone,
and like we have no say
in it whatsoever.

I don't think God works with us
like that.

God invites us to participate
in whatever God wants to
do with us,
just as Jesus invited the fishermen.

God gave us wisdom,
creativity, curiosity,
and imaginations.
God wants us to use those things,
as we respond to his call
upon our lives.

That's what I see as the
State of this parish -
a group of faithful followers,
who are listening for God's call,
and who want to hear it
still more clearly.

A community held together
by the power of the Holy Spirit,
bound to each other
by love for Jesus
and one another.

You are a people
who know what it means
to walk the way of the Cross,
and to rejoice at the break of day
on Easter morning.

You call your primary means
of communication
The Grapevine and the Vineyard,
fitting metaphors
for the fertile soil
this congregation has proven
itself to be over the years,
bearing the good fruit
of faithful ministry.

This is holy ground,
and you are a holy people,
because you have set your hope
on the Holy Word of God,

the Word made flesh,
on the living Word
that still speaks
that still harkens,
that still calls us

To follow where he leads,
and to proclaim the Good News -
That the Kingdom of Heaven,
has indeed come near.