

Epiphany 3, Year A
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
January 22, 2023
Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1, 5-13
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

Changes and Chances

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

Jesus, as we have heard for the past two Sundays, participated in the ministry of John, his cousin, his friend, his forerunner, at the Jordan River. Jesus joined throngs of people from Jerusalem and all over who went down, down, down below sea level to the Judean wilderness to listen to John's preaching and to participate in a mikveh bath, a water ritual, to mark their intention to change their minds and mindsets.

Jesus, after undergoing this rite of initiation for his ministry, went into the Judean desert beyond the Jordan River for forty days and forty nights. It was a time of intense discernment and vocational testing as he, freshly filled with the Holy Spirit and with the pronouncement of his belovedness by God ringing in his ears—he went out to determine what the character and quality of his public ministry would be.

Today he has returned from this intense solo retreat, which our brother Episcopalian Marcus Borg has said was more along the lines of a vision quest, to find that his cousin's ministry has been radically altered. John is in jail. Does this mean Jesus must alter his own plans?

Hard to say. Jesus' ministry could have taken many different forms, could have involved many different things. Perhaps he had thought up until now that John would handle the preaching and the making of disciples and that his own areas would include teaching and healing and having meals with the most unlikely of companions.

If John had not been arrested, would Jesus have begun preaching and teaching and calling disciples when he did or even at all?

Has this ever happened to you? You were on a particular course, an identified track. You were moving along, making progress. Then something changed, and you felt compelled to respond, to alter course.

After my Dad took ill, I returned to my home state of Georgia from Japan. Twenty-five years ago Friday I arrived in Japan for a life-changing, soul-deepening sojourn of more than five years. I loved it. I loved my life there. I was gainfully employed at work I enjoyed. I was studying Japanese religions, tea ceremony, martial arts, and Japanese language. I had loads of friends, and I lived in a wonderful community in the mountains of rural Hiroshima prefecture.

But, after my Dad took ill, twenty years ago, I returned to Georgia from Japan. My best friend from college says that if my Dad hadn't got sick, I never would have come back. She might be right. But, circumstances changed. My parents, who had never needed assistance before, needed my help. So, I went home. I hadn't lived anywhere near there since college.

Because I went home, I was able to be of service to my parents and have experiences with them in that season of their lives that I never would have been able to otherwise. Because I went home, I at long last began my doctoral program at Emory. And in the midst of that program, at long last I found my way into the Episcopal Church. I might never have come home from Japan, but I did. And here I am this morning as priest and public scholar and the thirty-fourth rector of St Paul's, Key West. Circumstances change, and we are compelled to change course.

Jesus the Christ is our model in all things, including in responding to changing circumstances, to the changes and chances of this life.

And our gospel companion this year, Matthew, repeatedly focuses our attention on change. How do we respond to change? How do we face change? How do we deal with altered and altering circumstances?

If John had not been arrested, would Jesus have started preaching and teaching and calling disciples when he did or even at all? It is hard to say. How many of us have wound up where we are, doing what we do because something happened to somebody we love, and we felt compelled to change course or to start something new?

Sometimes the ways we go into the world are predicated on the movements of others, on the circumstances of their lives. And sometimes we fail to recognize the

holiness in the ways our plans or our patterns are changed because of responding in love to offer what is needed.

Sometimes we discount or minimize the value of what we are doing because it isn't flashy or doesn't often make the news. But that's not really how we should evaluate our contributions, is it? The real test, the most important metric is whether we are making a difference with integrity, with wholeness, with our whole selves, whether we are offering ourselves for God's service as a living sacrifice in ways that fit us, suit us, that allow us to welcome ourselves as well as welcome others.

In these loving responses to changed and changing circumstances, new ministries are often born; innovations in ministry are brought to life. Sometimes these are very small-scale, quite operations; loving service; caring for our aged parents in their last years.

Sometimes these are innovations that blossom and grow into amazing community-based ministries affecting a wide circle or swath of people.

Sometimes these innovations are ministry experiments of an in-between size, not so big, but not so tiny that nevertheless have a big impact for people in the communities where they are offered.

Sometimes the new ministry lasts for a few weeks or months and fulfills its purpose and is celebrated as "mission complete." Sometimes the ministry continues for decades and continues to adapt to changing needs and circumstances.

For us at St Paul's, Key West, some of our ministries have been ongoing for years, such as the sharing of this beautiful space and all the other facilities on our campus with the wider community and with hundreds and hundreds of annual visitors. These ministries continue, and we are building upon them, altering approaches as indicated in our current circumstances. We are mobilizing resources to do what needs to be done so that these ministries of beauty and hospitality provided in large measure by these buildings can continue even after all of us are gone.

And some of our ministries are relatively new, such as the two begun by lay people in 2022. These are the Third Tuesday Healing Prayer service at Poinciana Gardens and the laundry ministry Loads of Love. These are ministry experiments that are being modified as indicated in their early days to best meet the needs of those served by them.

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When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

Matthew tells us that after hearing this disrupting news about John, whom he loved, Jesus made his abode not in his hometown of Nazareth but in a lakeside town in the same region called Capernaum.

And then Matthew's gospel reveals that Jesus, as John had done, begins calling disciples and begins a teaching and preaching and healing ministry all over his home region.

Jesus' proclamation is remarkably similar to John's: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

As we explored beginning in Advent, *repent* is a terrible translation for the proclamation of John and Jesus. The word in Greek is *metanoia*. It means change not remorse or regret. Jesus' message, like John's, was *change*: change your mind, change your mindset, allow your mind to be renewed by the Holy Spirit.

The message was and *is*: it's time; God is nearer than you have dared to hope; change and put your trust in this good news: God is love; God is reliable; God is trustworthy. It's a call to change our ways and our minds as more is revealed to us, not a call to feel bad that we haven't been better.

Perhaps Jesus really listened to John's preaching and really internalized his own. Because he changed. He changes direction; he adapts to changing circumstances in a way that is aligned with his mission and his purpose. In following him, we must seek to do the same.

And we see as Jesus begins to call disciples, he invites them as partners in ministry. He starts with these four guys who know how to fish and how to mend nets so they can keep on fishing. Jesus invites them to deploy the same skill sets with respect to other targets. *Fish for fish. Fish for people. I'll show you. Come on.*

It's challenging, isn't it, at the start of a new year, the start of a new season to find our footing, stabilize a little bit, set an appropriate pace as individuals, families, as a congregation, community, even as societies. What should we focus on given how many things clamor for our attention and energy? How quickly can we go? How quickly should we go? What is the pace at which we steadily make progress and build capacity without burning ourselves out as we respond to numerous challenges and opportunities on multiple fronts?

I wonder if in this new year, this new Key West season, is the Spirit whispering to you to continue work that you know how to do perhaps in a different way or in a different place? What are your transferable skills from the rest of your life to the ministry God may be calling you to in this time, this season? What have your life and your work and your studies taught you that you can apply in new ways? Life-giving ways for you and for others.

God is good and has endowed us with the capacity to face change and to adapt to changing circumstances. God has given us power to live with purpose and live *on* purpose as people of love and joy and integrity. Isn't it amazing God has seen fit to place us in now, which means not only God is love and God is trustworthy, it also means God loves us and God trusts us. What an awesome and wonderful mission to collaborate in with one another and with God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Y'all, let's be the people who live that mission.