

Sunday, January 26, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Come, Follow Me”

I had an opportunity this week to read a most intriguing book:

The Experience Of God by Eastern Orthodox scholar David Bentley Hart.

Hart has undertaken the somewhat daunting task of defining God.

He is not endeavoring to explain God but to expand our current thinking to embrace a theology that actually recalls an earlier time.

To speak of God, he says, is to speak of the one infinite source of all that is: eternal, omniscient [om-nish-uh nt], omnipotent [om-nip-uh-tuh nt], omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent of all things and for that very reason absolutely immanent to all things. He continues: All things that exist receive their being continuously from him, who is the infinite well spring of all that is, in whom all things live and move and have their being.

I want to unpack this a bit for you by defining some of the terms that Hart uses:

Eternal means without beginning or end, always existing outside of all relation to time;

Omniscient means the knowing of all things. Theologians have been debating the meaning of this for centuries. Karl Barth characterizes this as the “wisdom of God, a perfection of the divine loving,” while Paul Tillich uses the term as “a symbol meaning that nothing falls outside the centered unity of the divine life.”

Omnipresent is the attribute of God whereby God is said to be everywhere present – not localized in time or space. God’s creativity and power are at work in everything that is

Omnipotent is the possession of the perfect form of power – all-powerful God. Thomas Aquinas argued that this means that God can do everything that is genuinely possible.

Uncreated God is, God was and God shall always be. There is only one.

Uncaused means spontaneous – not resulting from an antecedent cause.

Perfectly transcendent means above all limits, surpassing, exceeding – not realizable in human experience.

Immanent denotes the indwelling of God in creation.

God is God – amazing, all powerful, loving, knowledgeable, creative beyond our comprehension.

We can have experiences of God and God’s goodness and spirit, but we cannot fully know or ever be God.

I start with this introduction this morning to stress not only the greatness of God, but also the divinity of Jesus.

As we make our way through the gospels for this time of year, we spend a lot of time with Jesus, the man.

We picture him living by the sea in Capernaum, calling Andrew and Peter to follow him, teaching, preaching, and travelling about the region as a noted and sought-after Rabbi.

I want us, however, to look more deeply into the story.

I want you to think about what type of man Jesus was and how he embodied the attributes of God that I listed earlier.

What made Andrew, Peter, James and John walk away from their lives to follow this man?

In the passage directly prior to today's reading, Jesus has spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil.

He, no doubt, had to grapple with his embodied dichotomy of human and divine.

In the desert, Jesus was alone. There was no one to help him or coach him on how to deal with devil's taunts.

He had to depend on his own strengths – on his own faith.

Henri Nouwen reminds us:

Solitude is the garden for our hearts, which yearn for love. It is the place where our aloneness can bear fruit. It is the home for our restless bodies and anxious minds.

Solitude, whether it is connected with a physical space or not, is essential for our spiritual lives.

It is not an easy place to be, since we are so insecure and fearful that we are easily distracted by whatever promises immediate satisfaction.

Solitude is not immediately satisfying, because in solitude we meet our demons, our addictions, our feelings of lust and anger, and our immense need for recognition and approval.

But if we do not run away, we will meet there also the One who says, "Do not be afraid. I am with you, and I will guide you through the valley of darkness."

During this time in the wilderness I envision Jesus praying the words of Psalm 27 that we recited earlier:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

When Jesus comes out of the desert, having met and defeated the challenge of evil, he is confronted with the news that John the Baptist has been arrested.

We can only imagine the myriad emotions that he might have experienced.

Someone who he cares for has been imprisoned; someone who he has looked to for spiritual guidance has been taken out of his life.

His cousin has been sentenced to death.

All of this must have felt like yet another encounter with the devil.

He is perhaps reminded of Isaiah's promise: *The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.*

He knows that he is called to be the light to those who have been sitting in darkness.

He knows what his mission is and at this most difficult hour he decides that it is finally time to start.

He moves himself out of his darkness and into the light.

When tragedy strikes, our human impulse is to *do something*.

When we see the unthinkable happening we feel helpless, wondering how we can help, what we can give, what we can do.

Perhaps when Jesus got the news of John's arrest he felt the same way.

In a time of such darkness, maybe he felt the urge to act, to help, to do.

In the darkness of fear, we bring light by offering comfort and presence.

In the darkness of hunger, we bring light by providing nourishment.

In the darkness of sorrow, we bring light by holding close.

In the darkness of violence, we bring light by speaking words of peace.

In the darkness of John's silencing, Jesus remembered the prophet's telling, and set out to bring light by fulfilling God's promise: the promise of Jesus himself, the living, breathing Light to the world.

Jesus emerges and issues his call to Andrew, Peter, James and John.

And they follow.

They follow a man in whom they see the glory and goodness of God.

They step beyond their boundaries of ordinary life and risk everything to be in the presence of this man who emanates Godly power and light.

When we are called by God, we can play it safe and remain secure in what we know or we can be bold, like the fishermen, and willingly follow and move in a new direction.

Jesus called the disciples to something that would not only give purpose and meaning to their lives, he called them to a vocation that would change the world.

They followed, and from then on their lives would never be the same.

We are offered the same opportunity.

Our *eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent, immanent God* calls us to follow him and work with him to bring near the Kingdom of God.

Let us hear his call and answer with joy.