

Date: January 22, 2023 (Epiphany 3)

1. Texts: Isaiah 9:1-4; Ps. 27:1, 5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23.
2. Subject: proclamation of the gospel.
3. Topic: contextual proclamation.
4. Aim: challenge, encourage.
5. Proposition: "Christian ministry is contextual."

WE MINISTER IN OUR CONTEXTS

It's fascinating: Jesus didn't begin his public ministry until the time was right. And that right time was in response to the arrest of his cousin, John. It's a small detail, often overlooked, but it says something significant about our proclamation of the gospel.

Jesus was about thirty years old when John the Baptizer was arrested. He could have started long before, but he didn't. He could have moved to Jerusalem where he would have found a larger audience, but he didn't. He waited until John had been arrested in Jerusalem and then moved to a fishing town on the north edge of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus waited to begin his public ministry and then made some strategic choices about that ministry. So what have we to learn from these often-overlooked facts?

First, the proclamation of the gospel is contextual. Our proclamation must respond to the actual circumstances in which we find ourselves.

So, three First Nations people appear in your church on a Sunday, and you adapt your ministry to their needs, rather than force them into your traditions and practices.

A 90-year old woman is housebound because of the weather, so ministry comes to her rather than expecting her to arrange a ride.

A local business discriminates against visible minorities. You publicly boycott that business.

You see? Our proclamation of the gospel is directed not by our past but by our circumstances. We mold our ministries according to the needs of the people in front of us and according to the demands of the gospel.

The second truth Jesus teaches us is that we have to make strategic decisions about our ministry. We do not just stand on the street corner, shouting randomly at people who walk by. We don't take a "shotgun" approach to ministry, shooting the same message indiscriminately at everybody everywhere. We plan. We choose. We act.

That's because our resources are limited, as were Jesus'. We cannot just scatter our resources of energy, time and personnel as if we were planting an infinite amount of grass seed. Instead, we examine the needs, develop our resources and act with divine purpose. We minister as Jesus did when we treat our limited resources responsibly.

We proclaim the gospel in the contexts of our lives. We make strategic choices about that proclamation. This is what Jesus' own actions teach us. But there is a third and even more fundamental truth hidden beneath these two. This third truth is likely the most disturbing of the three.

Jesus actually went out to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. He did so in his context and made strategic choices about his ministry. But he did go out to proclaim the gospel of salvation.

At the end of his ministry, he ordered his disciples to do the same.

And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'¹

¹ Matthew 28:18-20.

If we are Christians, we have received the divine command to make disciples. If we are not making disciples, we are being disobedient to the direct command of Jesus. If we are not making disciples, we ignore the example and life of Jesus.

That is disturbing. But it is what Jesus himself demonstrated. In response to the arrest of John the Baptizer, Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum to begin his ministry of preaching salvation. He preached that gospel in word and deed, beginning in Capernaum and then later spreading his message further. He enlisted others to help him and directed them to preach in their contexts. He made choices about ministry so as to best shepherd his limited resources. His ministry was not aimed at keeping doors open or salaries paid. He ministered to people in their circumstances according to the divine call to salvation, responsibly using what resources he could develop.

This is still God's call to us today.

AMEN.