

Epiphany 3, Year A, 012311
All Saints Episcopal Church

"The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian."

In the name of the one God, who creates, redeems and blesses us. Amen.

The lessons for today, the third Sunday after Epiphany, are ones with which we are familiar. From Isaiah, words about longing and dreaming for better days ahead, as well as hoping for change in a world that is beyond our control. In the Psalm: the Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear? From Paul's letter, imploring that the Corinthians to whom he is writing would be in agreement, that there would be no divisions among them, and that they would be united in both mind and purpose. And, of course, Matthew, whose Gospel reading is probably the most familiar: that of Jesus calling the first disciples to follow him, so that he can teach them how to fish for people.

So right now you're probably settling in for a sermon about call - how the first disciples gave up everything to follow Jesus - or how fishing for your livelihood is a lot different from fishing for recreation - or how we are called to use the gifts we have been given to answer our call from God - or how our call is to care for the marginalized of our society. I'm pretty sure that between Jim and me, we have preached on all of those angles at least once, and the last one, about the marginalized, at least every other Sunday! In fact, Jim's blog this week was about just that subject.

In many sermons and commentaries about how it is possible to respond to God's call, the answer is by knowing first that God loves us; if we know we are loved, we can love others. Simple? Yes. Easy? Not necessarily. And I mean the part where we know that God loves us is not necessarily easy. So today, I want to talk about answering the call from this different perspective - one, in fact, that I had never considered before until a good friend introduced me to it. It comes from a book called *Befriending the Stranger* - a series of meditations by Jean Vanier, the founder of l'Arche.

In one meditation, entitled *God is calling us into the world of love*, Vanier begins by saying that Jesus came into the world to bring peace, to bring us all together in

one body, in a body where everyone has a place. But, he says, we have turned the world into a place where competition, rivalry, conflict and war between races, religions, social classes and nations rule the day. And we have become people who feel we must protect and defend ourselves -- our own family, our own class, our own religion and our own country.

So when we are asked to care for - to love - those who are poor, outcast, and marginalized - we don't always find that to be an easy task. We feel defensive, worried that in giving of ourselves to others we will have to give up something we don't want to lose - that our way of life will be changed - that we won't WIN whatever it is we are supposed to win. We might become poor, outcast, or marginalized like them.

This defensiveness of ours is the way we deal with fear and vulnerability. Fear of being wronged, fear of being hurt, fear of being considered weak. Vulnerable to pain, vulnerable to being bullied, to being looked down upon, to being rejected. So instead of taking a chance on being hurt, we protect ourselves by being on the attack, as it were. You know, like the saying, "A good offense is the best defense."

But here's the rub - God's ways are not our ways. God doesn't choose the way we choose. God chooses the poor, the weak, the vulnerable - those who recognize their poverty, that is. And that does not mean only those who are poor in material goods; it also means those who cannot cope with life, those who feel powerless and those who do not know what to do.

The parent who has lost a child is 'poor'. The wife whose husband has left her is 'poor'. The child who finds out she has cancer is 'poor'. The man who senses his body is growing older and weaker is 'poor'. The family who finds itself in difficult relationships is 'poor'. The list could go on and on. The problem is that we generally refuse to acknowledge our weakness, our neediness, our poverty because we are afraid we will be rejected because of it. We are taught to be strong, to be self-reliant, to be winners, to be 'the best'.

Since we as a society tend to marginalize the weak, we think that weakness means rejection. So we try to hide our vulnerability as long as we can and pretend we're strong and in control. But we are not strong or in control.

We are poor.

We are vulnerable.
We are weak.

When we can admit that about ourselves, then we can open ourselves to hear what God is telling us. God says that we do not need to pretend. We don't need to hide our weakness. We do not need to be afraid.

I would like to ask you all to think about something for a minute. Think about one thing in your life that makes you poor or weak or vulnerable. You don't have to make a list - just think of one thing.

Now - I'm not going to ask anyone to say anything at all - but I want to ask you, if you are willing, to raise your hand if you could think of one thing that makes your poor or weak or vulnerable.

It's OK. Don't be afraid.

Now - look at how many hands are raised. Are you surprised that yours is not the only one? Do you see any looks of rejection because you have raised your hand? Do you feel like rejecting anyone else who has raised a hand?

God calls each one of us and all of us together. Each call is different, yet each call is the same. When we know our own vulnerabilities, we have room to experience God's love for us. When we know God's love for us, we can love others the way we are loved. Our call is to "grow in love, in wisdom and in inner freedom and thus to bring greater love, peace and freedom into the world." All of us. Together. In community.

May we all hear God's call in each of our hearts. Amen.