

3 Epiphany B Sunday of DioSWVa Annual Council 2015

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Walking along the Sea of Galilee Jesus announces, "*the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*" Jesus' ministry begins with an intense and quick-paced urgency. The kingdom of God is not far off or far away. 'No,' Jesus tells us, 'it is *very* near to us.' So, now is the time to turn it around and trust in the good news.

The messiah of God desires for those he calls disciples, including us, to grasp that extreme urgency and to act on it. Time's a wasting. This pressing and urgent Jesus is a quick change from the quiet, sweet little baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Jesus' message as he encounters men and women is not: "Hey, just take your own sweet time, because the kingdom of God will just wait around until it is convenient for you to get involved with God's mission." The season of Epiphany is about calling and committed response. Epiphany accelerates quickly. It is, after all, a season of light. And that revealing light travels fast.

I saw the movie *Interstellar* over the Christmas holidays. *Interstellar* is my kind of movie because I love space movies. Now, I'm not talking so much about Sci-Fi space movies like *Star Wars* with crazy creatures like ewoks, yodas, and wookies. I like true and relatively realistic space movies like *Apollo 13*, *The Right Stuff*, and the even the recent *Gravity*.

As a kid, I was completely enthralled by the Apollo moon missions. I watched all the news coverage, read everything I could, built model rockets and lunar models.

My heroes are real astronauts: Alan Shepherd, "Gus" Grissom, Neil Armstrong, and Jim Lovell.

Now there are two parts of my fascination with space travel. The main one is the mystery and the wonder of space. What's out there among the stars? For my theological mind it is about the absolute vastness and mystery of God's infinite creativity. What's out there for us to discover? What beckons us beyond our fragile earth with its one moon orbiting that brilliant yellow star that God created some 4 billion years ago? It is an immense frontier.

The other part of my ongoing space fascination is my interest in astronauts. I like everything about astronauts and what it takes for them to survive and succeed in interstellar exploration, but it is their courage and hope that I most admire. It takes loads of courage just to sit on top of a huge rocket.

More than that, though, is the courage to go into the unknown with no certainty of what the journey holds and no guarantee of return.

Interstellar is a real astronaut and rocket kind of movie. It takes place in the near future of our human history. We have, of course, ruined our environment and must now explore alternative planets for our survival. The main character is the astronaut Cooper played by Matthew McConaughey. Early in the movie, disgusted by limited and desperate earthbound survival strategies, Cooper looks up into the night sky and says: “*We used to look up at the sky and wonder at our place in the stars. Now we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt.*”

To me this is a theological statement. It is hope and optimism for the future versus despair and pessimism.

When NASA proposes a mission to find a habitable planet, Cooper asks how long he will be gone and what are the odds of his return. He has two young children with no mother.

A critical part of the mission’s solution hasn’t yet been solved and so the head of this urgent mission is only able to say to Cooper, “*you will just have to trust me.*” Cooper will have to trust and courageously launch off into a risky, uncertain but promising mission.

As he is walking along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus comes upon two pairs of brothers- Peter and Andrew and James and John. He challenges them to journey with him into a new way of living that will change the world; Turn it upside down. They will have to trust this charismatic teacher. There are no guarantees. It will be a journey of faith.

Now, whatever it is that convicts and compels them, Mark tells us that all four of them *immediately* drop what they are doing and go. Immediately.

Do they follow Jesus in search of riches? Nope. Fame? Nope. Permanent vacation? Nope. Inner peace? Well, maybe, but not to begin with. So, why do they go? What do they hope to find?

Maybe after all those nights of fishing under a vast sky, these brothers wonder about their place in the stars and are tired of worrying about their place in the dirt. They desire more for their lives and the lives of their children.

Mark doesn’t tell us much of anything about Jesus’ conversations with these brothers before they make up their minds to go. However, he must point to and promise them something that is robust enough to draw them in.

To Peter and Andrew and James and John, Jesus says, “*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*” Surely, there must have been a little more explanation?

Of course, we cannot separate *this* calling episode from the others ones. The other accounts fill out the kind of promises Jesus was making to the variety of women and men that he is calling into a missionary fellowship.

Last week, on the Second Sunday after Epiphany, in John’s Gospel, we heard Jesus calling Philip and Nathanael. Jesus says to them “*You will see greater things than these . . . you will see*

heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” ‘You’ll have to trust me on this.’

In the very next verse after calling these two pairs of brothers, Mark tells us “*they were astonished by [Jesus’] teaching.*” Astonishment is a state of speechlessness, awe and wonder. Are we astonished? Are we ready to engage at a deeper level?

Besides their adventurous natures, when thinking about this mission of evangelism that Jesus invites Peter and Andrew and James and John into, it is essential to note the kind of fishermen these brothers are. They are not just two brothers on a small johnboat with their separate fishing poles, tackle boxes and an Igloo cooler.

No, these were commercial fishermen who were looking for shoals of fish. Their lives, the lives of their families and communities depended on their success. And so they were in large boats using casting nets.

A casting net is a good missionary image. A casting net is a large circular net with weights around its edge. It takes skill to throw one so that it lands open faced on the water. It is thrown out and then, after letting the weights drop, a handline is used to close the net and haul it back to the boat, hopefully full of fish. If the fishermen are lucky for the net to be full, several strong hands are needed to pull it overboard.

Jesus knows these brothers are committed and responsible. They know about teamwork and community. Jesus hopes he can connect this great missionary expedition to their fishing experience. “*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*” He most likely sensed that these guys might just be up for such a journey.

Jesus’ urgent call is to a journey. It is about venturing into new frontiers of human experience. That is why the early Christians called it The Way. It is a mission of evangelism; spreading the good news of God’s approaching kingdom. Is Jesus’ call less urgent for us today? If our answer is, “*no, it is not less urgent,*” then we have to ask how our parish communities and we are urgently engaged in the mission of spreading the Good News. What are the outward signs of our urgent mission? What kind fishing are we up for?—Casually dropping a line from a nice steady pier or major fishing in unknown and choppy waters teeming with fish? How are preparing to go forward trusting the mission God has in store for us?

It takes courage to go into unknown frontiers with no certainty of what the journey holds and no guarantee of success. Peter and Andrew and James and John and all the other men and women who embarked on the Way with Jesus choose mission over maintenance.

We are called together in this southwestern part of Virginia, from different places and different backgrounds, to be Christ’s body in the world. And each of our fifty-six Gospel communities is

different. Each of our Gospel communities must faithfully muster the courage to journey out into the surrounding mission fields of its particular context with the resources available to it.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John to leave their nets behind and follow him, they immediately stepped up. I like to think of them having an astronaut's grit and sense of wonder. They did not ask Jesus for a balanced budget. They did not require that the HVAC have a maintenance contract. They didn't offer a list of reasons why now was not a good time to get involved.

Jesus called them to put down their nets of self-concern so that they could go out into a new frontier for the sake of others.

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. They hear Jesus' promise and they trust it.

And they follow Jesus because they sense in him that the urgent nearness of God's kingdom will be far greater than the small kingdoms that they were building for themselves. Their courage and their faithfulness in Jesus paid off. They do see greater things. It can be the same for us today. With God's help we can turn it around and believe in the Good News. And that is the Gospel truth.

AMEN.