

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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January 25, 2009
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 1:14-20

The Opportunity of a Lifetime

It is no exaggeration to say that it was an interesting fall to be living on the far side of the Atlantic.

Last summer, in preparation for our fall sabbatical in Northern Ireland, Dan and I filled out our applications for absentee ballots, which got us thinking about what it would be like to follow the presidential election while in another country. We thought we might escape some of the silliness that the media make into stories, or some of mudslinging that we too often hear, and get just the real news. Hah! American politics are of such interest, at least in the part of the world where we were, that we heard all about “Joe the Plumber,” Obama’s supposed terrorist friend, and Sarah Palin’s wardrobe. We thought that we might feel isolated when it came time for the election—but we discovered that despite the time difference, the BBC and CNN gave all-night election coverage, and many people we knew stayed up all night, or got up at 3 am to hear the early returns. They knew the significance of Ohio and Florida and some even understood the electoral college. It was an education for us to see how the world views our country, how much power and influence we have in the world, and how many people were hoping that our election would be a turning point in world affairs.

It was also interesting to follow the economic news from the other side of the Atlantic. Last summer, economists (as I recall) were using the word “recession” but politicians were still trying to avoid it. It was a “credit crunch,” a “slowdown,” a “problem in the housing market.” Europe was feeling the same way when we arrived. But the house of cards came tumbling down quickly as we all learned of banks and financial institutions and billion dollar corporations collapsing or asking for government bailouts. In the small country of Northern Ireland, the credit union called The Presbyterian Mutual Society became the victim of the United Kingdom’s bailout of the banks—forcing churches to suspend building projects, and causing individuals to lose their savings. The “credit crunch” turned into a “global financial crisis.” As with the election, we could see how interconnected the world is, and how America, for better or for worse, leads the way.

David Stevens, the leader of the Corrymeela Community (where we were volunteering for three months) posted his observations of the financial crisis on the Corrymeela website. On September 23 he wrote,

Last week the world changed. Suddenly masters of the universe were revealed to have feet of clay. Mini-masters were carrying their belongings out of munificent glass-fronted buildings. Relics of this world were auctioned on e-bay. . . . The magic, mystery and aura of the market lose their power to enchant and we discover where greed and unrestrained risk-taking bring us. Marx talked about the ‘divine power of money’ and this is a cruel and capricious god.

www.corrymeela.org, “The Week the World Changed” 23/09/2008)

We could feel the high anxiety where we were living, and we could imagine what it was like here at home. Because of the nature of a sabbatical, we knew nothing about church news. So we didn’t know that this congregation was experiencing its own financial crisis—which was, of course, nothing compared to the global one, let’s keep perspective—but

certainly was exacerbated by the daily news. I am told that Linda Loving, our sabbatical supply pastor, told the congregation at one point to “turn off the television,” which I believe was probably very wise pastoral advice. We all know that bad news creates a feeding frenzy in the media, and drives the collective anxiety deeper towards panic. We all know that Roosevelt was speaking truth in his first inaugural address when he said “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” We all know that, but it’s so easy to be sucked into the vortex of fear. It’s as easy to fall into fear as it was to fall for the delusions of what David Stevens calls, “the make-believe economics of the bubble world.” (www.corrymeela.org, “A Land of Enchantment,” 15/10/2008) The author of Psalm 62, long ago, warned us all not to put our faith in the world’s economic measures—both high and low estates are ephemeral, a delusion, a breath. Don’t put your confidence in riches, scripture says bluntly. And as Stevens says, “money is a confidence trick—it’s nothing in itself, only a means of exchange.” (www.corrymeela.org, “Everything Solid Melting into Air, 13/10/2008) Instead of trusting the financial wizards, instead of looking with envy at the Yellowstone Club, it’s time for us all to find a new religion.

We are in a crisis moment. No question about it. As a congregation, as a nation, as a world of nations, we are in a crisis. But you may have heard the Chinese wisdom about “crisis.” The Chinese character for “crisis” requires two brush strokes. One signifies “danger,” and the other signifies “opportunity.” (Interestingly enough, that observation is attributed to both John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon!) So when I say “We are in a crisis moment,” I am reminding us all, “We have an opportunity before us.” It’s an opportunity to make a choice.

So it was when Jesus came walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. His message announced a crisis—danger and opportunity—the kingdom of God was near. His message announced a choice—repent, or not. Believe the good news—or not. His message spoke to some fishermen, and the rest is history because they made their choice to follow him.

First century Palestine had its economic woes, too. It was a place with a sharp division between the rich and the poor. It was an occupied country, ruled by a Roman governor with law and order kept by a brutal Roman army. It was a land where the people of the city and the people of the country lived very different lives. Most of the rural people were subsistence farmers, who grew crops on land that they did not own. Taxes to the Roman Empire, and the tithe to the Temple, and rent to the landowner, and seed for the next year often meant that there was barely enough to get by. Add a drought or a natural disaster, and economic life was precarious for most people.

But these four fishermen—Simon, Andrew, James and John--were not poor. They owned boats and nets, and employed hired workers. They had some security, and responsibility, too. They had families to support. They weren’t desperate peasants ready to follow the first social revolutionary who walked by—they were middle class, small businessmen with a pretty good assurance of food on their plates and roofs over their heads.

So why did they do it? Why did they give up their economic livelihood, their security, their way of life to go with Jesus? Why did they make that choice?

It has been said by persons wiser than me that all people are motivated by two things—fear or love. Think about it. Reduce all other motivations to their core, and you’ll find either fear or love. And in the case of the four fishermen, it can only have been love which motivated them to follow Jesus. Fear would have kept them in their boats, mending their nets for another day of the known, the secure. Fear would have stopped up their ears to the message of this itinerant preacher. Fear would have said, “We can’t go with him now—maybe we can volunteer once a month, or send a check to his ministry—do you think that would be tax-deductible?” Fear would have meant staying with the status quo even when the kingdom of God was near and available.

Fear would have meant passing up the opportunity of a lifetime for those fishermen. But thank God those four fishermen did not let fear dominate their decision in that crisis moment. Thank God the love which Jesus offered to them was powerful enough to overcome any fear, and thank God they leapt from their boats, their hearts leaping with love to give back to this charismatic, enigmatic, powerful, humble Jesus. Thank God, because they became the prototype for the rest of us who would seek to follow him, too. Not out of fear, but for love. Because he loves us first, and the way to love him back is to follow him in the world.

A crisis is an opportunity to choose love over fear. A crisis is an opportunity to change the way we’ve been living and follow Jesus in a new and deeper way. Who knows where that might lead? For the fishermen, it meant going with Jesus to meet people who were suffering and truly in need. If they thought they were struggling, when they were with Jesus, they sure saw people with worse problems. But by following Jesus, they also witnessed God’s power to heal and to give new life and hope to the desperately needy. For the fishermen, following Jesus meant entering into new relationships, expanding their horizons beyond kin and tribe. With Jesus, they learned what it means that God loves ALL people, even the poor, even the tax collector, even the Romans, even the Pharisees, for in the community gathered around Jesus, those distinctions are irrelevant. For the fishermen, following Jesus meant walking with him into the arenas of power to say “You’re not really in charge here, God is,” testifying to the reign of God right here and now, and seeing Jesus submit to the authorities who didn’t want to hear that message, so they executed him for it. If that isn’t a good excuse for fear, I don’t know what is, and those four fishermen weren’t immune from letting fear take over their behavior. But when it was all said and done, they still loved Jesus enough to stick together and see him return. Following Jesus began with a crisis and ended with a crisis, with lots of smaller crises in between—but each crisis was an opportunity to choose again to follow Jesus in the world and into everlasting life. A crisis is an opportunity to repent and believe the good news of God—and then to live it.

So I believe that this global financial crisis could be a good thing for the world, if we choose to see it as an opportunity and our motivation is love. Do you remember the global food crisis which was in the headlines before this financial crisis? It hasn’t gone away. It’s still needing to be solved so that the world’s people can obtain the food which is available, which is enough for all. The world has an opportunity. Maybe this national financial crisis could be a good thing for our country, if we choose to use the opportunity to, say, rebuild the decaying areas of our cities and revitalize family farms and rural communities, or if we invest in sustainable energy infrastructure to give people jobs. Just some ideas. Maybe the

impacts of this financial crisis which we are feeling locally could be an opportunity to increase the compassion and unity of our community, encouraging neighbors to look out for one another and support one another in time of need. Fear will make us retreat from one another; love will make us a better community. And maybe this congregation's financial crisis will yield a more cohesive vision of what God wants us to do and be, a greater commitment to one another and to our common mission. I said "maybe," but I will testify that the session has already moved beyond fear to deeper love and commitment. It is my hope that the whole congregation will join them. And maybe, if you are among those who are experiencing financial uncertainty yourself, this crisis is your opportunity to reorder your family's priorities to follow Jesus more faithfully. Maybe it's your opportunity to lean more on your church family, or on your faith, and learn to define abundant living the way Jesus defines it, not the way our consumer economy defines it. I think we all could benefit from that.

For when Jesus says, "Follow me," he is inviting us to a new way of life. Being a disciple of Jesus is not like joining a nice club for the social benefits and to do a few good projects together; and it's not like buying an insurance policy for eternal life, either. To be a disciple of Jesus is to see his invitation to follow for what it truly is: a crisis moment, full of danger, and at the same time, the opportunity of a lifetime.

In the name of Jesus Christ, I invite you to follow him.