

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 ~ Matthew 4:12-23

When Does It Begin?

Third Sunday after Epiphany ~ Sacrament of Holy Baptism ~ Receiving of New Members

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Introduction to Second Lesson

When did Jesus decide to begin his public ministry? Our Bible tells us he waited until he was thirty years old. Given the average lifespan in Jesus' time (among those who made it past infancy) was about forty years. That would mean Jesus was already on the older end of the adult spectrum when he began his public ministry. Although we will never know *why* he waited until he was thirty years old, Matthew (and Mark) tell us something about the event that moved him to take action. Something that was the catalyst for him to begin. It was the arrest of John the Baptist, prophet (& his cousin). It's right there in verse 12. He took that as his cue to step up and step out.

There are four other men named in this story: Simon and Andrew, James and John, who heard the call to begin something brand new for them. How did they know, *how do we know* when it is time to make a keystone decision. That is, a decision that will change the trajectory of our lives. For example, a decision to begin or end a certain career; or the decision to begin or end a significant relationship. Maybe it's easier if you have a brother to "jump ship" with (pardon the expression). Apparently, for those four, the time was right. Were they sick and tired of the Roman Empire oppressing them, their families, and their livelihood at every turn? Maybe they were young and scrappy and ready to make a difference somehow, some way. And then along came this invitation from Jesus.

Now it's time to settle into your pew, as we take a trip to Capernaum, in the nebulous northern territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, where the first two tribes of Israel went into exile under Assyria. These place names are not incidental but signify the beginning of the reversals that Jesus is inaugurating, in response to John's arrest. Out of that darkness, light. Not just for the people of Israel, but also for the Gentiles and all the people. Let's listen to the story of when Jesus began, according to Matthew, chapter 4, beginning at verse 12.

Sermon

When does it begin? I'm just guessing that when some of you looked at the bulletin or read the eblast and saw that we were baptizing Josie Kathleen, *and* receiving seven new members all in one worship service, your question (whether spoken out loud or to yourself) was not "When does it begin," but rather, "When does it end?" Theologically speaking, that is another question for another day.

Today, on this third Sunday after epiphany, our scriptures readings are all about beginnings. And so is our service: a baptism is a beginning. The receiving of new members is also a beginning. But when *does* the kingdom of heaven come near, as Jesus proclaimed at his start up? Both of the rituals in which we will participate today, with words and promises, with water and oil, with gifts and hugs: we are touching holiness. We are saying "yes" to the One who called us into being, who looks at us in love. And we are saying "yes" we want to love one

another as you love us. In a very specific way. God's way. In God's alternative kingdom. "Yes, we want to be a part of this, now." In this "yes", the kingdom of heaven comes near.

Josie won't know what was started today until her parents (and maybe Teddy will tell her first). I think our seven new members already know: They are signing up, they are saying "yes" to being activists for the Kingdom of God in the name of Jesus. Each of them has their own spectacular take on what that means and how we are to go about it. Yes, seven new opinions and seven new sets of gifts, talents, passions, and commitment. With them, they bring six wonderful new children into our family of faith: ranging in age from 3 to 14 years old, their names are: Leif and Olen, Jude, Arissa, Robert, and Josette.

As Paul instructs his new church in Corinth: A wide diversity of commitments, perspectives and opinions are God's gift to us. The more diverse, the better! God loves diversity and calls us to love it, too. God has mysteriously drawn these new members to us from many different places. Their short bios in our insert begin to tell a bit of their stories. You may wonder: when did their relationship with FPC begin? This "Investigating Church Membership" class actually began last fall, on October 23. Like the beginning of our relationship with Christ; the beginning of a relationship with a community of believers, begins mysteriously. And is as unique as each person on this earth. I will confess, one of the people joining today, after having worshipped here very regularly for several months asked me, "What do you have to do to get a nametag around here?" Jesus had called their name, but we were woefully slow on the draw. Thankfully, grace abounds.

Friends, I believe God's work of gathering and restoration, the basic practices of resistance in a fragmented, disintegrating world, began at the first dawn. The coming of God's rule: calling, healing, and liberating has been called "good trouble." It involves stirring up resistance. God calls us to be a part of a community where we lead with Love, rather than being right. That's hard for all of us.

So how does it begin? I think it begins when we decide to listen to those with whom we disagree. I think it begins when we invite conversations, give and take, where we practice "speaking the truth, our truth" in love. That happened at our recent Forum for All, as we sought to learn together through an intergenerational conversation, about the complexities of gender identity. I think it begins when we take Paul's words to the church in Corinth to heart. It begins every time we choose to seek unity, while not confusing unity with uniformity. We do this best at the foot of the cross.

Although I am asking, "when does it begin?" I hear Jesus asking us, "When will it begin to make a difference?" That is, when will Christ's work on the cross, God's raising Jesus from the dead, make a difference in our hearts and our world. God knows it doesn't happen instantly. And it works much better together. That's why we are here together, learning how to be the Body of Christ at FPC. The work of repenting, that is changing hearts and minds, is ongoing.

Nor is it always fun. In fact, honestly, bringing the kingdom nearer is hard work. Tedious work. There's the necessary net mending. There are long nights of casting about and catching

nothing. More often than not, kingdom work is not something you'd post on social media. No one makes a TikTok video depicting the decision to show up for someone, or something (whether you feel like or not). Nor does the decision to stay until the end of the meeting have much chance of going viral. Except maybe in God's eyes.

Darkness has many levels and likewise hope comes in many forms: It could be the granting of refugee status to a family fleeing a war-torn homeland; or food from a food bank, like SOS, or peanut butter sandwiches packed by NOW, to help a child get through a long weekend in a house where the refrigerator is empty. Hope came through the Juntos program we hosted here last fall, to a family and their high school student for whom English is not their first language. Week by week, that student found their spark again. Hope can come in the form of disaster assistance after a storm, like that given through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. Or a job for someone who have been unemployed. These glimmers of light penetrate the darkness of despair. These sparks of hope and light incarnate in Jesus: and that is when it begins.

I found a prayer by Pixie Lighthouse, an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, in which I hear Jesus calling us to leave our boat of before, and say "yes" to being a part of bringing the kingdom of heaven near, right here and now. Let us pray:

Help me to speak out for justice with a special desire fueled by a power greater than surface comforts and outdated systems. Let me be a troublemaker to champion those I love and care for, and for those I don't know intimately who need my help. Hire me to be a powerful voice for the change that heals, reconciles, forgives, and improves. Help me create time and space to lend support where it is needed. Transmit to me the passion to be bothered by violations of another's rights to life, liberty, happiness, and their voice. Find me faithful and in service, riding shotgun to heart-led movements, and leading the charge when it is up to me to do so. Remove my feelings of hopelessness in what I perceive to be the opposition. Align me with action and channel my energy for others.

Bind me to the medicine of love. Let me affect the transformation that leads to needed change. Light the torch of revolution in my heart. Stand me upright on a foundation of faith while I take the next steps. Build my voice as an instrument for defending freedoms which provide equality. Keep my motivations clean. Grant me the tools to see near and far and find me adjusting the lens often. Help me to give a leg up to the underdog: to root for the one who doesn't stand a chance. Help me to accept being unliked or misunderstood for positioning myself behind what I believe in.

Bolster my confidence and give me the understanding and empathy required for sustainable existence. Make tolerance my priority and give me the words and actions to fight violence with the sword of peace. Orient me to inclusivity. Help me to stop putting individuals into dualistic opposition, rather focus me on repairing broken systems, and my participation in them. Dissolve my tendencies for cliques, partisanship, judgement, righteousness, bandwagons and the damning or idolizing of those I perceive to have more than me.

*Help me to do my part to clang the bells of freedom. When ten thousand are whispering, make me one who is listening. Amen.*ⁱ

ⁱ Pixie Lighthouse, *Prayers of Honoring Voice*, (Lighthouse Publishing: Redmond, OR, 2017), p. 37. It was used with permission on the Center for Action and Contemplation Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations, January 21, 2023,