

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday July 4, 2021 Proper 9B
Gospel of Mark 6:1-13
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: Jesus Sends Us Out!

Our Gospel story today is a story about a local boy made good. Jesus goes back home to his roots and does what he does best. He teaches and people are amazed. He reveals wisdom and people are threatened. He challenges the way they see the world and they are offended. So, what is supposed to be a homecoming story, a look at my boy-didn't he turn out well, turns into rejection.

This story from Jesus' early ministry is about a mission that has to be aborted. It is a cautionary tale really, about thinking too little of others, of discounting one another's gifts and of being contemptuous of that which is familiar. "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (vs. 3). This passage reminds us that people are a deep mystery and that our job is not to limit them or put them in their place but rather to fan them into flame and encourage them to become the living light of Christ in the world that they are meant to be.

Jesus manages to heal a few people and then he walks away from the whole scene baffled by their unbelief, their sniping criticism and their unwillingness to become open to the power of God at work around them. It begs the question: Are we open to God doing something remarkable in our midst? Are our ideas about God and what God wants to do in this community too small?

Jesus sums up his adventures in the hometown synagogue this way, "Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown, among their own kin, and in their own house."

If you were asked to define a prophet, what would you say? Matthew Fox put it this way: "The mystic in us is the lover. The mystic says yes. But the prophet in us is the warrior, and the warrior says no, "No, this is unjust. No, this is suffering that we can work to relieve." That's the rhythm of the mystic and the prophet, the lover and the warrior. It's not enough to be one or the other." So, I believe that Jesus calls us all to be mystics – lovers of God, of creation and of each other but God also calls us to be prophets or warriors, people who defend what we cherish, who respect the dignity

of every human being as we strive for justice and peace among all people.

The prophet is one who engages people through their own religious and moral imagination in ways that wake others up to what is happening in the world. Prophets are uncomfortable with the status quo as it is so often exploitive and prejudicial. For Jesus this was about the poor being able to lead decent lives, caring for those who suffer, and breaking down barriers that divided people from one another.

Looking back through my camera roll this past week and I came across some photos of General Convention 2015 in Salt Lake City. General Convention is a gathering of the entire Episcopal Church that happens every 3 years and acts as a decision-making body that includes the voices of both lay and ordained members of this body of Christ. It's a powerful time of seeing the church at its best and worshipping with the worldwide communion of Christians that call themselves Episcopalians.

At that General Convention, to which I was a deputy from our Diocese, The Episcopal Church took the historic step of approving rites for the blessing of same-sex marriage. It was done with prayer and sensitivity toward those who were in disagreement with this decision in the church. There was, to my surprise, almost no triumphalism but a quite celebration that God was indeed doing a new thing, that a wall of separation had come down and that our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ were no longer second-class citizens in the church. It was a prophetic moment in the life of the church and I was blessed to be a part of it and proud that our part of the Christian church had finally taken this important step. The work of justice is never over, and part of celebrating the liberty we enjoy in our country is to admit there is so much more that people of faith can do to bring about true equality around racial reconciliation and economic justice, not to mention environmental stewardship that threatens our very existence. God's work in and through us continues to stretch and change us in ways that we might never have anticipated until we catch a vision of God's dream for creation.

The second part of this passage is about mission. Jesus wants his message to get out, he wants to expand the circle of his love, compassion, and healing. In order to do this, he sends his own disciples out in pairs to spread the word. They are sent out in pairs, because ministry is best done in relationship and community. He sends them out traveling lightly so that they are humble, open to God's provision, and dependent on God from the very beginning. The mission is founded first in the surprising grace of God, the unexpected opportunity that is actually the God-breathed opening, the vulnerability that makes the messenger a human being who

can relate to other's needs. The point of this story is about getting outside of our comfortable ways and pushing into deeper water. It is about being sent out into the wide world by Jesus to give witness to whatever good news you have inside of you.

In March of 2020, we found ourselves sent out in a very different way that was well outside of our comfort zone. One week we were worshiping in church and the next week we were online from my office with an iPhone sending church to Facebook Live. It was one of the craziest experiences of our lives and I'm so grateful for Deacon David and Mother Sylvia and now Jeremy Wirths for their deep partnership, incredible creativity and serious hard work over the last 15 months. We were certainly sent out with very little instruction, limited resources and made to depend upon one another and God in surprising ways. It was something that forced us to innovate, demanded our best creative efforts to keep the community gathered, stretched us in so many ways and made us so grateful for the loving support and encouragement of our community.

Online church was difficult to get used to for all of us. Some people just said, "No, I'm not doing online church," and that was worrisome. How would we stay connected? We were suddenly in the marketplace of church and people became consumers of online church. Some people simply told us, I like such and such better and drifted away. One person actually told me that we, "Were not meeting their online needs." I was unaware of their online needs to be honest. In the mist of all of the uncertainty, some wanted things as traditional as possible to push back against the growing chaos and change. In the midst of racial unrest and a toxic election cycle some found us not radical enough and told us that we were failing them. It really was an amazing ride for a church that sometimes struggles just to have working microphones. We were suddenly broadcasting live via zoom and Facebook with 3 mac laptops and an iPhone. We could not compete with The National Cathedral's production quality. Surprise! It was absurd at times, infuriating, hilarious and to be honest still is to this day. But, Covid sent us out into the missional space that we had never been in before, no one had trained us for and we survived and grew and learned what was essential for our community. It wasn't about professional video editing and our amazing production crew, it was about a community of faith offering its gifts in a homegrown and folksy way that said, this is us, this is St. Mark's and we want you to participate and stay connected and be the church online from your home or your backyard. I cannot tell you how many people have told me that their favorite part of the liturgy became the children leading the procession from their homes with our traveling processional cross in their backyard, around their homes and most memorably bouncing their way through the opening hymn on their trampoline. These were the joyous entrance rites of St. Mark's over the past year as we sang at

home, delighted in children leading us in worship from their isolation and found ourselves connected in surprising ways. We laughed, we sang, we smiled and God said, it is good, it is good when all of God's people, children and youth and everyone have a part in worship. The choir worked hard to record music on their phones and splice it all together, people read from home, forgot to unmute, forgot that they were unmuted, and led the prayers from home. And through it all, I am amazed and grateful that the overwhelming tone of our congregation was, "Thank you," thank you for all that you are doing, thank you for the creativity, thank you for including children and youth, thank you for creating something uniquely St. Mark's that was real and human and worshipful and deep and connective. Quite a few people decided that we were crazy enough for them to join us and found their way into our congregation online and now are sitting with us here today. This sending out of the St. Mark's clergy was not exactly 2 by 2 but I guess in 3 by 3 and if you really want to know, Karen McDaniel was here for practically every service (Thursdays and Sundays) over 15 months as our only altar guild person helping us to make worship happen. It was an amazing gift that she offered to the whole community and we are humbled by her generosity of life.

This past year was a sending out that none of us could have expected and I am so thankful that we handled it in our joyous, authentic, creative, inclusive, participatory style that makes us the community of St. Mark's. We might want to think that it was Covid that sent us out in this new way, but in another way, it was Jesus who sent us out into this new mission field. It was Jesus who said, hey I want you to start streaming your Holy Eucharist there at St. Mark's live next week. Oh, I know you don't really have very good internet and that you hardly understand streaming technology and don't have any cameras or a tech team but just do it anyway and by the way your budget is basically zero have a good time. The most important thing is to be faithful, to love people and try to help them stay connected to their community and to God in the midst of this most difficult crisis. That's what I ask of you and if you do that, then you are feeding my sheep and being God's person in the world and that is what matters, not whether the sound is perfect, or someone was unmuted during the gospel reading and talking about their pancakes. Kids sliding down their play set with the processional cross is a moment when the angels in heaven look on in wonder agog at that new move and wondering why they hadn't thought of it. Oh, I know Covid sucks and online church is so far from perfect and satisfying but you did it, I sent you out 2 by 2 or 3 by 3 or 4 by 4 and you did it, you made worship happen, you preached the gospel, you had fun making the most amazing Christmas Pageant ever and it was glorious and beautiful and reverent and a little irreverent and full of the Good News.

The point of the story is that Jesus does not try to save his disciples from the outside world. Rather they are saved by their engagement with the world because it pulls them deeper into relationship with the living God. We “churchy people,” that’s you and me I guess since you are worshiping here this morning, have a tendency to be turned inward but this passage is about Jesus saying, “Get out there and be my people in the world.” It is interesting that this sending out of his disciples is prefaced by his own ineffective ministry in his hometown. In essence, Jesus is saying, hey you just saw me go down in flames now it is your turn. I’ve showed you how to fail, it’s your turn to start taking risks to get the message of my love and forgiveness out to the people. It is not a secret. It must be shared. So, get out there, go where I send thee.” The only way I have to get my message out is you, yes that’s right you.

As I was thinking about this passage and Jesus sending his disciples out 2 by 2, I had an interesting vision. While we managed to keep our congregation vital and growing during the pandemic, it has also been hard on folks and some have wandered off or just lost contact with their church. So, I thought what if this sermon was a sending out of each one of us here to reach out to those who we don’t see or are missing from the fellowship? What if your mission in ones or twos over the next month or two was to reach out to those who were on your phone tree calling list or those you’ve been wondering about and haven’t seen? Every week people tell me, “Hey Fr. Christopher, I haven’t seen so and so, you should call them?” [pause]. Do you hear what is wrong with that sentence? I’m glad to call people who we haven’t seen but it matters a great deal more if our members call to check-in on someone they are missing. What if we as a faith community took Jesus a bit literally here and reached out to folks with only our own limited resources and natural curiosity about how people survived the isolation and invite, welcome and companion people back into their own community? If people are missing, there is a story there. If people are out of rhythm, they may need your help finding their community mojo again!

Jesus sent his disciples out to share the good news of the kingdom of God. Like them, Jesus sends us out, the people of St. Mark’s to share what we know of Jesus in this world, to gather the community after a season of scattering. No one is asking you to save anyone, that is God’s job. What Jesus is asking each of us, is to be God’s person in the world. Truthfully there are as many ways as there are people to be God’s person in the world. As Kat Duff said, “Faith is not something you must have or cannot lose, but something you practice because the world depends upon it.”

There is no better time to get tangled up in the mission of God in this world. It is the adventure that we are invited into every day. It is a risk to admit that you might be a mystic – a lover of God, of creation, of each other and it is risk to realize that you too

can be a prophet someone who goes deep into the heart of God and dares to say this is not the way God's desires things to be, this needs to change. We are all called into the mission of God and the good news is that if we dare to engage this mission, we will find we are not alone, for this is where Christ himself is to be found.