

Jesus is Full of Surprises  
Epiphany 3, Year A  
22 January 2023

The Rev'd N.J.A. Humphrey  
St. Thomas's Anglican Church, Toronto  
Matthew 4.12-23

✠ In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Jesus is full of surprises. In this season of Epiphanytide, we focus on the surprising manifestations of God in the person of Jesus Christ. The big one, of course, is the feast of the Epiphany, also known as the manifestation to the Gentiles, because the three Wise Men represent all the nations of the world coming to worship and adore the King of the Jews. Then there is the Baptism of Our Lord, when the Spirit descends as a dove and the Father proclaims, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." And let's not forget Jesus' turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, which is also a manifestation of his divinity. But there are smaller surprising epiphanies, as well. That's what these other Sundays of Epiphanytide are all about. Last week, Jesus surprised Andrew and Peter with the invitation, "Come and see"; this week, it's even stronger: "Follow me."

But Jesus' summons to his new disciples isn't the only surprise in this morning's gospel. Jesus also surprises us in that he does *not* show up where we might *expect* the Messiah to manifest himself: in Jerusalem, at the Temple. He seems to have decided to keep a low profile after John the Baptist was arrested, perhaps because those around him fear he will suffer the same fate. Maybe it is the case that, as John's Gospel puts it, Jesus has a keen sense that his time has not yet come. It *will* come, of course, but not until he surprises those around him many, many more times.

In any event, Jesus chooses to make his home in Capernaum, on the borderlands between the Jews and the Gentiles. It is a surprising place to make one's home, if you're supposed to be the Messiah, the King of the Jews. It's a backwater, a significant town in an insignificant area of the Roman Empire. Matthew reminds us that this is in a part of Israel that the prophet Isaiah had described unflatteringly, writing, "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

According to one commentator<sup>1</sup>, Isaiah had described the occupants of that territory as sitting in darkness for at least two reasons: "First, their land was much closer to Gentile peoples and thus more vulnerable to attack. Second, the people living there were far away from the cultural and religious centers of Jerusalem and Judea. They had to travel some distance to reach the temple and the dwelling place of God." Matthew uses Isaiah's words to show us that Jesus is the light of the world. "He shines brightly in the land of darkness known then as 'Galilee of the Gentiles.' Instead of coming first to the 'well lit' region of Judea, Christ comes first to the people living in darkness."

The second surprise we find is that Jesus, seemingly abruptly, calls Andrew, Peter, James, and John to be his disciples. We know from last week's gospel that he has already met Andrew and his brother Simon, whom he immediately nicknames "Peter", meaning "The Rock", so perhaps it doesn't come as a complete surprise that he has plans in store for them. It likely comes as something of a surprise

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bibleref.com/Matthew/4/Matthew-4-16.html>

to Zebedee, the father of James and John, though, who gets left behind in the boat. Imagine that poor man, now bereft of his sons, scratching his head and wondering how he will ever cope with the surprising amount of work now left to him to do on his own. Thanks a lot, Jesus.

Perhaps the *most* surprising thing about our gospel lesson this morning, however, is that if we read it carefully, it should eventually dawn on us that Matthew intends Jesus' summons to extend to *us*, as well. *We* have been called to follow him. We have all been called to be willing to abandon *everything* to do so. Matthew wants us to understand that until we repent, *until* we decide to follow Jesus, we are living in darkness, "in the region and shadow of death", and that Christ alone brings us light and joy and life.

The more we read about the sort of light and joy and life Jesus promises, however, the more surprising—or perhaps flummoxing is the better word—it gets. The Good News is not a promise of a comfy life, but rather the joy that comes from serving God and others, not ourselves. True joy comes about through a paradoxical *renunciation* of those things we think will bring us the greatest sense of security and freedom: a good job, family, a stable home.

Now, for those of us who have never had these things, there's little to renounce and much to gain, which is perhaps why the Good News often resonates more with the poor among us, with the refugees and immigrants and all who are in some way displaced, than it does with those among us who are more deeply embedded in the status quo. If it's true that the Gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable, it's precisely because the Good News comes as a pleasant surprise to the poor and an unpleasant surprise to the rich.

Yet, Jesus wants *all* of us to follow him, not just those to whom his presence promises immediate and tangible balm. Elsewhere in the Gospel, he tells the rich young ruler, "Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor then come, follow me." Jesus mourns when the rich young man turns away from the path, and yet we are *not wrong* when we feel pulled by stable jobs, a mortgage, a spouse, and the trappings of our lives. Our challenge is peculiar: How do those of us with binding commitments follow Jesus when we can't leave those nets that need mending behind, when we can't leave our father in the boat to fend for himself?

At times, Jesus seems rather uncompromising, saying things like "Let the dead bury the dead" and "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God". But must this summons to "Follow me" always be so radical?

I think the answer is yes, if we understand "radical" as not forcing us into an either/or choice: either keep living as we are living now, or leave it all behind and follow Jesus, but as a resolve to get to the root of our life. After all, the word "radical" comes from the Latin "radix", which means "root". (This is, by the way, the same root word that gives us the word for the root vegetable known as a radish.) When we dig down to the roots of something, we find what is really nurturing our commitments, that is, what motivates who we choose to be and what we choose to do with our lives.

To be honest, most people do things not because we are radically committed to following Jesus, but because we are seeking the easiest way possible through life. And that's completely understandable. But following Jesus in the midst of our commitments to work, family, and friends means being radically committed to responding when Jesus surprises us. Jesus truly is a man of endless surprises.

If we let Jesus into our marriage, our marriage will become yet one more way that we live as his disciples, and learn to follow him by learning to love our spouses as Jesus loves us. If we let Jesus into our friendships, and even into our enmities, our relationships will be transformed as we learn to love our friends and enemies in the same way that Jesus loved his. He washed the feet of his friends and he prayed for his enemies. What acts of service and compassion might we be called to show our friends and neighbours, both those we are fond of and those we'd really rather avoid?

If we let Jesus into our work, our jobs will become not a distraction from our faith but the very material on which our faith is constantly at work. In fact, there's a whole website I discovered while working on this sermon called "Theology of Work" which aims to help laypeople connect their work lives with their faith. There is a lot of surprisingly good stuff at [theologyofwork.org](http://theologyofwork.org), which I commend to you.

So, yes, Jesus is full of surprises. By this I don't mean that he sneaks up on us from behind and shouts, "Boo!", but rather that he is constantly whispering in our ear, "Follow me." The way we follow him is precisely by letting him into our lives, with all their commitments and complications. It is perfectly possible to follow him *through* these things, not *despite* them. The surprising thing isn't that Jesus calls us to follow him, but that the things we are doing right now are the way to follow him, if we let him shine his light into our lives. We don't necessarily have to change our jobs, leave our families, sell everything we have and give it to the poor—though some of us may find ourselves called in one way or another to such radical renunciations. I suspect, however, that for most of us it's by radically embracing the places of our lives where we least expect to find Jesus that we will find Jesus showing up. The very things we find most challenging about our lives aren't challenging to Jesus. We may be walking in darkness and in the shadow of death, but to Jesus, that's just a walk on the beach. Our problems aren't problems to God. There's nothing about who we are or what we're dealing with in our lives that surprises God. And that's the best surprise of all.

✠ In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.