

4 Epiphany  
January 31, 2010  
Fr. Bill McGinty

## **“From Risk to Opportunity”**

Today’s readings are about ‘beginnings.’ Jeremiah is called by Yahweh to be his prophet. It is the classic story of God calling someone into his service.

Speak to anyone who has a job that they regard as a vocation or a special calling and ask them: “When did you feel called to and do this?”

You may be surprised to learn that irrespective of the age that people begin some sort of ministry for God, they can often trace the first glimmer of God’s call to an earlier part of their life.

Michelle white knew as a young girl that she was destined to preach the Gospel. She knew that she was called to be an Apostle. Her hands shook when she picked up her Bible. Her voice would change as what she read so enthused her that her whole face changed with it. Several times her dream was derailed by circumstances and once by jealous envy by church male colleagues.

When she came to Good Shepherd some five years ago, she thought that that dream had passed her by. I can remember the day I heard her conducting a Bible study class in the vestry room. As she spoke and talked, she transformed the people around her with her enthusiasm and love of God’s word.

After the meeting I did the same thing the Rev. Betsy Myers did to me ten years before, I called Michelle into my office and I said the same words to her as Betsy said to me: “Michelle, my sister, it is my belief that God is still calling you to his work, and to be a Pastor in his church. With your permission I will write on your behalf to Bishop Paul.”

Perhaps there is someone here today reading these words who knows or suspects that God is calling them to some kind of ministry: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

It is not everyone who responds to God’s call. Even in the Gospel, the rich young man turns away from Jesus and walk with Christ no more. Because what Jesus asks of him is too difficult.

Three years ago this week, I stood in this pulpit and I invited everyone in the church to participate in a Parish Project about wellness. The project was to take place between Easter and Advent made up of house discussion groups and six special wellness liturgies. At the heart of that project was the idea

that each of us is called through Baptism to work for the Gospel and therefore each one of us is called to ministry.

Not everyone took part in the Parish Project, there were one or two who did not. Those who did came up with the concept of Shared Ministry. Whereby more and more people became involved in the mission and ministries of this church. Embedded in that concept is the idea that there are no ordinary parishioners. There are extraordinary parishioners whose talents and abilities help fulfilled the mission of this church.

Today, there is no activity in this parish that is not a part of shared ministry. Belonging to shared ministry is to belong to the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ. Directly, or indirectly if you are a part of shared ministry you are a part of saving souls.

Jesus in the Gospel today is embroiled in a debate in his own synagogue in Nazareth, with people who will not accept that he is called by God, and that he has been given authority. He quotes those lines from the Prophets Elijah and Elisha, both of whom were rejected by their own people and went instead to minister to Pagans in a foreign land; Elijah going to a widow in Sidon and Elisha to Naaman the Syrian.

Ministry and God's call is like that. If we are faithful to our Baptism, then we are invited by God to ministry. Ministry is a kind of faith. It is a credo that says: "Not only do I believe, but my participation in Christ's salvation is the mark of my faith."

In our Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians 13, St Paul writes the words that have resounded down the centuries on love and what it means. Every couple seeking marriage in this church seems to choose this passage to begin their life together. Every old married couple, use it as a measuring stick of the quality of their love that has survived the years.

This week I read an interesting article that Sandy sent me, which says that there is no such thing as evil, there is simply the absence of God and the absence of his love. Without God in our lives, we are not capable of love.

Last Monday the committee on Congregational Development met in Wilkes Barre with Bishop Paul. For the first time its sub committee produced a document that will rock the foundations of the Diocese of Bethlehem to its core. The document is entitled: "From Risk to Opportunities." It is a detailed examination of the state and health of the parishes of the Diocese and it is the blueprint needed to fix them. From this committee this document will go to Diocesan Council and from there to every vestry and congregation in the diocese.

With it will go an invitation to participation in diocesan wide programs for parish's wellness, health, growth and recovery. I use the word 'invitation' loosely, what the Bishop means is:

“Show me that you are ministering to God’s people and the local community and that you are capable of being a viable express of the Gospel, building Christ’s Kingdom. The alternative is that your time has passed and your resources should now be placed at the disposal of a new ministry elsewhere.”

The report makes this general observation that : “For a parish to have the ability to maintain itself and have the opportunity to grow, it should have an energized, full time priest, and annual budget of approximately \$150,000 and an active outreach program. To do that you must have an annual Sunday attendance of at least 75.”

Drawing from 2009’s National Council Strategic Planning Survey in the Episcopal Church, the report quoted the five most important goals for parish growth as:

1. reaching youth and young adults
2. evangelism
3. worship music and liturgy
4. leadership
5. strengthening congregations

Congregations that are outward looking and strive for healthy independence as an opposed to interdependence have a much better history of parish growth. All those parishes have the following in common says the report:

1. they have a common vision and plan for the future
2. they have a compelling prayer and spiritual life
3. they focus on their own strengths
4. they have strong clergy leadership
5. they have some form of shared lay ministry with maximum lay involvement

Today’s readings apply fit the call to all parishes, clergy and laity by Bishop Paul and the report of the Congregational Development Committee.

The time has come to arrest the process that has led so many churches into decline, and begin the recovery of the Diocese through applying our strengths and the abilities of our people. Just as the New Hope campaign of the last two years galvanized the parishes to raise 4 ½ million dollars for the people of Kego Keji so this report and its application calls on all parishes to respond to God’s call, the call of the Gospel in their lives.

Together, we are called to be disciples and each of us use our God given abilities to grow the parish and serve the needs of all.

Let up pray:

“God our Father, we recognize today that we too are called to ministry through our Baptism. Like Jeremiah of old, we await the gift of your word.

We realize lord, that it is only with love existing between us that we can work, together with one vision, one mission, for our parish. Help us adopt Paul's vision of love.

Send us out, to each and every heart that needs Jesus Christ, and return us to this place, better to make it a fortress of your word, a towering witness to your Gospel.”

Amen+