

Blessed be the Name of the Lord, henceforth and for evermore.

Last week, Father Jeff invited us to think about this parish of St. Alban's, and think about not only what has called – each of us – to this particular church in this particular time, but also, what keeps us coming back week after week, year after year. What is it about this unique place that feeds us at the deepest level?" he asked. What is it about St. Alban's that helps us be closer to God, to grow in our faith, and that provides a spiritual home for ourselves and our families?

The ushers handed out half-sheets with two simple questions: Fr. Jeff invited each of us to think about how God has called each of us to be a part of this church community, and to identify those specific things – different for each of us – that keep us coming back. As market research goes, it was not exactly a scientific survey – more of a focus group, really – but I must say I enjoyed very much reading through them this week.

In the small stack of responses that Fr. Jeff gave me to read this week, there were responses from people who've been members since the 1960s – almost since the very beginning – and some who, like me, can still measure their tenure in terms of months. Some of you indicated a spiritual origin for your initial call to St. Alban's – the Holy Spirit was mentioned more than once – but for many of us, it was indeed a combination of the practical and, perhaps underneath that, a larger spiritual reality that we suspect just might've been at work. For some of our younger respondents, the answer was very pragmatic: in answer to "what called you to St.

Alban's" there were several who simply said, "my parents." One person, who gets extra points for honesty, wrote "because my parents make me."

I was surprised how many people mentioned a specific name of a member of the parish as a primary force in their initial call to St. Alban's. Sometimes, it was a neighbor, a member of St. Alban's, who personally invited them. For others, it was a specific person who greeted them warmly when they arrived. So many people reported their first impression of St. Alban's came through an encounter with a lay person here – someone who showed them kindness, a gesture of friendship, and thus made them feel welcome.

I am a newcomer by comparison with most of you – and already, I feel a sense of deep connection here, mostly because of the strength of the friendship I already feel with so many of St. Alban's people. St. Alban's is a community of mission – always looking outward, seeking ways in which we can engage with and serve our neighbors in need – but it is also a place in which we see the presence of God in one another...and, in doing so, discover the reality of God's image in our selves.

The lectionary this week assigns us some very brief readings – quick, simple, direct and to-the-point. I can only assume this is to give the preacher more time, to preach a longer sermon...right? (I'm kidding – "short sermons" was mentioned several times in the responses to last week's survey, and I'll do my best to honor that.)

Jesus approaches Andrew, Simon Peter, James, and John, who are – as far as we know – going about their business on a normal work day. This is a familiar story for most of us – especially those of us with an evangelical background, who may

have grown up singing a camp song about it... "I will make you fishers of men... If you follow me, if you follow me..." And the text tells us that "immediately" they dropped everything, left their families and responsibilities, and followed Jesus.

I wonder about these regular Joe's – these seemingly average guys, working for a living, keeping the family business running. Some days the catch was plentiful, and sometimes it was lean; but either way, it was still a paycheck-to-paycheck kind of existence. Certainly they must've felt some anxiety about walking away from it all – I mean, as it was, the business operated on a very thin margin. On the best of days, a full net and a robust catch needed all hands on deck.

It is hard to imagine – what must've gone on in their heads, that allowed them, these four men, to make such a quick decision? What about their responsibilities? How would they live, where would they sleep, what would they eat? Not to mention, WHAT WOULD DAD SAY?! The reaction of the family to such an abrupt and seemingly reckless choice might be enough for me right there to say, "thanks, but no thanks."

I don't know about you, but I think that I see myself more clearly in the reaction of Jonah – surely, a very different context, but another option – when faced with a clear call. Jonah was, as most of us remember, a man who was swallowed by a whale. But the story is actually much more interesting than the little bits we remember from our childhood Bible stories: Jonah was a prophet, called by God to preach repentance to the citizens of Nineveh – the Assyrian city in upper Mesopotamia. Jonah was sent by God – according to the text, in no uncertain terms – to warn the citizens there of the destruction God promised to bring upon the city if they failed to repent and turn to God.

“When God ordered him to go to Nineveh and tell them there to shape up and get saved, the expression on Jonah's face was that of a man who has just gotten a whiff of septic-tank trouble,” Frederick Buechner wrote. “In the firstplace, the Ninevites were foreigners and thus off his beat. In the second place, far from wanting to see them get saved, nothing would have pleased him more than to see them get what he thought they had coming to them.”¹

God plainly tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, but Jonah has other plans. He goes in the opposite direction, and, as we all know, that did NOT turn out well. Finally, when God speaks to him a second time, he has learned his lesson – thankfully. And something quite unexpected happens – something that almost NEVER happens in scripture. The people hear Jonah’s words – they heed his dire warning – and they repent, and turn to God.

You’d think Jonah would be happy about this, right? I mean, he’s been through this whole ordeal, from the digestive tract of a whale – that’s a whole level of suffering which is hard to imagine. He finally does what God asks of him, and when he does it, he is successful. And he’s happy ever after, right?

Not Jonah! He’s angry at God – he wanted the Ninevites to persist in their wickedness, because he wanted to see them get their just desserts. He prays to God to take his life – interestingly, Jonah finds it unbearable that God is “gracious...and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...ready to relent from punishing.” Jonah is, like I am sometimes, petty, petulant, and selfish. We want God’s favor for ourselves – but, for those people over there? Our sworn

¹ Frederick Buechner. July 27, 2016. “Jonah.” Web: <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/7/27/jonah?rq=jonah> Retrieved January 21, 2018.

enemies? Those who've done us wrong, and caused us grief? Those people who belong to the other political party? Give me a break – God MUST feel about them the way I do...right?

And so, in today's readings, we have these two very different responses to God's call – in the case of these working men who dropped everything to follow Jesus, immediately, ostensibly leaving their nets on the gravel shoreline. Mark's telling of the story is frightfully short on detail—he is, after all, the Hemingway of Gospel writers—and is also short on inner monologue. We very rarely are told what the characters are thinking in any given situation, so it's hard to know what considerations might have been going on in their minds. On the other hand, there's Jonah – cranky, selfish, and obstinate. It's tempting to read these two stories and wonder which one we would be.

But if we stop there, we might just miss the larger, more important point: that God calls us, ordinary people, to do his work in the world. God acts in the world through people like us. Fishermen, businesspeople, tax collectors, soldiers...even a frightened young virgin. It's almost like God is taking us by the shoulders and shaking us, saying “Do you get it yet?? I need you. I'm not looking for perfection, I'm looking for YOU.”

The point is that God doesn't call people by sending out a general request, or putting up an ad on a message board – not even a lengthy announcement in the bulletin. “Hey, just wondering, could someone follow me? Email me for details.”

God calls us by name. God knows us, deeply, and wants us to know him.

Sometimes it's hard to know just what God is calling us TO – but make no mistake, God has an intention for each of us that is unique, and special.

“The truth of the matter is that every follower of Jesus is called,” my friend Steve wrote this week. “Called to proclaim the Good News. Called to share in the restoration of all relationships. Called to vocation. You see, call isn’t just about the servanthood of a deacon or being pastor, priest, and teacher or, for a few poor souls, being made one with the apostles, but it is about being a bearer of the Kingdom of God no matter where one lives and moves and has their being. Call is about being a witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ as a doctor, lawyer, grocery store clerk, small business owner, student, stay at home parent, or retiree. Call is about sharing the love of God within one’s unique sphere of influence. Call is about allowing the light of Christ to shine through us, so that the God’s good dream for creation can be seen. Call is about each of us taking our part in the making Jesus Christ known.”²

Amen.

² The Rev. Steve Pankey. “Answering the Call.” Draughting Theology (blog). Web: <https://draughtingtheology.wordpress.com/2018/01/18/answering-the-call/> retrieved January 21, 2018.