

“Jesus Calling”

There is a lot going on in today’s Gospel lesson. John the Baptist has been arrested by Herod Antipas son of Herod the Great. Because of John’s arrest Jesus returns to his home region of Galilee far away from Herod. But Jesus does not stay in Nazareth long before he heads to Capernaum and makes it his home base. Capernaum is on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew tells us that this is to fulfill a prophecy from Isaiah that a great light, in this case Jesus, will shine on the people who live in darkness, the people of Galilee, especially the Gentiles on the far shore.

Then Jesus takes up preaching what sounds very much like what John the Baptist was preaching. That is, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” To put Jesus’ message in gospel music terms you might think of the song “People Get Ready.” If you don’t know that song, look it up on YouTube. Listen to the original by Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions. There is also a great version by Jeff Beck and Rod Stewart, and there are other versions from performers as varied as John Denver and U2. It is also worth noting that this song became one of the anthems of the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Martin Luther King used the song at rallies to encourage and to console his followers. But I digress.

Despite all of what we read going on in this passage, possibly the most memorable is Jesus’ calling of the disciples. What has always struck me about this call narrative is the response of the fisherman brothers—Simon and Andrew, James and John. In each case the brothers when addressed by Jesus drop what they are doing and follow immediately. Imagine a call to a new life so powerful that they would leave their respective father whose business of fishing they were dedicated to and following a guy they had never met to “fish for people.” They might have wondered what it meant to fish for people, but they followed because the power and charisma of Jesus was irresistible.

Jesus’ call was not just irresistible in his day his call continues to be irresistible for many. There is one young man that you should know about who could not resist Jesus’ call. His name was Jonathan Myrick Daniels. Jonathan was born and raised in New Hampshire. He first heard a call in his teens and it took him to the Episcopal Church. While he thought his call might be to ministry, when it was time for college he chose to attend the Virginia Military Institute. He graduated valedictorian of his class in 1961. He then headed to Harvard to study English, but his call to ministry persisted and he began his studies at Episcopal Theological Seminary in the fall of 1963.

In March of 1965 he and other seminarians responded to the call of Dr. King to join the Civil Rights marches in Alabama. He went for a weekend, but felt called to come back for another two months. He returned to seminary for exams in May. Then in July he went back to Alabama to tutor African American children, desegregate public places, and help people apply for public assistance. Following the passage of the Voting Rights Act in August he helped African Americans register to vote.

He few days later he joined a small group of protesters to picket “whites only” stores in Fort Deposit. They were arrested and transported by garbage truck to a jail in nearby Hayneville. Despite efforts to bail out various members of the group, the sheriff would not allow anyone to be bailed out unless all of them were. After six days the group was released without warning. While one member of the group went to call for transportation, the rest waited outside the courthouse. During the wait four of the group crossed the street to a store that would serve black people in order to get soft drinks. The group included a Catholic priest, Jonathan Daniels and two young black activists.

As they approached the store they saw their way was blocked by a recently deputized construction worker. He pointed his shotgun at the group and fired. He was aiming for seventeen-year-old Ruby Sales. But Daniels reacted quickly pushing her out of the way and absorbing the entire shotgun blast. He was killed instantly. The Catholic priest moved away shielding the other black teen. He received a shotgun blast in his back. The killer was acquitted by a jury of twelve white men saying he was acting in self-defense despite the fact that the four he shot at were not armed.

Daniels was honored posthumously by Dr. King and others. He is one of two Americans that the Episcopal Church honors as an American martyr, the other being Dr. King. The girl Daniels protected went on to seminary and is a human rights advocate in Washington, DC.

Jesus’ call is not easy to resist. What he calls us to will change our life. In some cases, as with Daniels and Dr. King, it may even mean that we forfeit our life in order to answer the call. Is it worth it? Allow me to quote Dr. King’s last speech which he gave in Memphis the night before he was assassinated.

“I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I have been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up to the mountaintop. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to that Promised Land. So I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. ‘Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.’”

We don’t have Jonathan Daniel’s thoughts before he was murdered. We do not know the thoughts of many who died after answering God’s call. But I think that Jonathan and so many others would echo King’s words. When God calls there is the opportunity to go to the mountaintop and see The Promised Land. It is a vision that is beyond compare with anything the material world can offer.

The material world will fight back. It will tempt us, it will abuse us, and it will do all in its power to take from us the hope of that vision. Do not let it. Be like the disciples, Mary, Martha, Jonathan, Martin, Teresa, Julian, and so many others who were called and followed and were nourished by the vision of the Promised Land that only God can provide.