

Sermon Text for March 7, 2021

By: Rev. Frances Carr

An Invitation

First Scripture: Ezekiel 3:1-7

Second Scripture: Matthew 4:18-22

Will you pray with me: Precious Lord, help us to remember that the grass withers, and the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Amen

READ: MATTHEW 4:18-22

Today we are taking what I am going to call a “Philippian Pause”....not a pause from the Joy! but a pause on Pastor Bob’s Lenten journey through the book of Philippians.

So, here is what landed me in front of you this morning....

I received an email from Tess Feiler with an invitation to preach on March 7, Celebrating the Gifts of Women Sunday.

Hmm...what an invitation: It felt both exciting and unnerving since preaching is no longer my regular gig....And...during the pandemic with all the additional challenges. I was intrigued. With much prayer and reflection, it seemed as though Tess was a vehicle of the Spirit. So, here I am!

INVITATION....now that is an interesting word:my reflection on it is what led me to this message about inviting....

I Got to thinking about how we are constantly being bombarded by invitation messages.

We are invited to shop in this store, drive this car, eat at this restaurant. We are invited through the mail, in television commercials, texts, emails, social media, billboards.

So how are we as Christians able to discern the invitations of the Holy Spirit amid all the invitational noise around us???

Let’s look at our Scripture readings for today.

Our Scripture reading from the prophet Ezekiel is only one example of God's invitation to the people of Israel.

Previously in Ezekiel, God describes the people of Israel as rebellious.

"Go and speak to the house of Israel." God tells Ezekiel. Give them another chance. Go and speak my very words to them even though They are a people who will not understand.

In the lesson Debbie read this morning, God describes the people as rebellious, hard-headed and stubborn. Yet God still commands Ezekiel "Extend my invitation to the exiles.... tell them "thus says the Lord God, whether they hear or refuse to hear." Ezekiel's determination to prophesy was stronger than Israel's refusal to hear God's invitation.

. God persistently and loudly extends hope to this rebellious people.

But we know that Prophet after prophet was ignored. Until finally the invitation came IN PERSON.

God in the person of Jesus Christ, came to give the people one more chance.

Those invitations from Jesus are extended to us today. They don't come mailed in beautiful stationary, but Jesus' invitations are more thrilling than anything we would ever receive in the mail. They require us to do more than put on party clothes and find our way to Jesus on Google maps.

Responding to Jesus' invitations is more complicated. It opens us up to different kinds of risks. We are free to refuse the invitation. we can hesitate when it comes to accepting the call. The gospels are one of our sources of discernment.

Earlier in the chapter we read today, Matthew describes Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, following his baptism. Jesus is offered invitations beyond what we will ever receive, but he rebukes the devil, saying, "do not put the Lord your God to the test".

Matthew next describes Jesus moving near the Sea of Galilee in further preparation for the beginning of his ministry as he begins calling those who will become his closest followers. ... COME..... FOLLOW ME.....I will change your lives.

."Come... follow me and I will make you fishers of people," he says. The gospel writer tells us the men drop everything and go after him. They leave behind all their security and means of livelihood and even their family. They follow Jesus in complete trust, unaware of where he is going or what will happen to them. Their invitation to follow Jesus is life changing.

Our New Testament Scripture invites not only Simon, Andrew, James, and John, but promises that invitation to you and me as well.

But there's more....

.....
 COME, follow me. I will give you life and ... I will teach you how to offer new life to others.

In Matthew chapter 11 , Jesus again **invites**: Come to me, all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens , and I will give you rest”.

In John Chapter 15, Jesus **invites** us to remain in Him “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

These invitations are not affected by storm, snow, loss of power, life difficulties, or pandemics.

We are invited to come, to find rest in times of distress. We are invited to stay connected to Jesus.

....How do we do that??? Again comes that question (opportunity) for discernment.

We need to be watchful for those invitations that are dangerous or unhealthy when we talk about the value of invitation. The people of Israel often fell into the traps of those bad invitations. They were the invitations of other gods or of greed and power. We can be snared by things we thought we needed, invitations that lead us away from a healthy relationship with God.

Recently in the Wired Word Sunday School class we had a class about idolatry. We discussed the fact that good people are **not** easily drawn into the invitation to do bad things but are invited by the good....Some examples of what I mean might be spending long hours of work and overtime with the promise of more money for the family, while not leaving enough for the family for whom you are making the money. Many hours of serving in a volunteer capacity , receiving praise and affirmation, while not leaving time for our everyday family responsibilities....where affirmation may not always be swiftly provided.

Varieties of unhealthy addictions can invite us to overcome what we know are the healthy ways to care for ourselves.....

Again, Matthew's gospel reminded us that Jesus had just been baptized when Satan offered him what seemed like a gold-plated invitation to conquer all the kingdoms of the world. but Jesus was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit enabling him to turn his back on Satan.

This is the Holy spirit that is available to us as we seek to discern and respond to the RIGHT invitations.

During all these months of the pandemic many of us have tried to find new ways to have the companionship that was formerly so easily available to us, and to find new ways to sustain our spiritual journey.

Not that I have researched this, but I am relying on experience . On this Gift of Women Sunday, relying on personal experience leads me to believe that women more often are the first responders to invitations and are more often the inviters. One example I am most recently aware of is this:

A woman in my neighborhood felt called to take a risk. She invited a small group of women who most often only greeted each other with a wave and quick hello to begin a bible study. This same small group of 5 women practice careful social distancing while meeting together weekly to share Scripture and pray for one another.

Think of the ways in which we as a church model that invitation to others that is our biblical mandate. We invite others into relationship with Jesus in myriad ways.

We **invite** people to worship with our fellowship; .We gather food so that we can **invite** people who are hungry. We **invite** little children to play together, learn together and learn about how much God loves them, in our Great Beginnings pre-school. the New Beginnings Ministry of the Church **invited** single mothers and their children to have the opportunity to begin anew...to write a new story for themselves and their family.

So back to my original question:

how are we as Christians able to discern the invitations of the Holy Spirit amid all the invitational noise around us??? We remember God's persistence in that the Holy One continues to pursue us. We pray, we turn to trusted people of faith . But first and foremost....We look to the source of our faith as we listen through the noise for the voice of Jesus who says, follow me, rest in me, stay with me.

This morning, we are all invited to receive fuel for our Spirits as we come to the table to remember the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Come now for all is ready. The table is set, AND YOU ARE INVITED TO THE FEAST.

LET US PRAY