

**Matthew 4:12-23**

*When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:*

*“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,*

*on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—*

*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.”*

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

*As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*

*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

I have been wondering about something this past week. I have been wondering about when the Christian Church started.

I know when it was born. You know the story. It was born on Pentecost, right?, with the sound of a mighty rushing wind when the Spirit of God came with tongues of fire that rested on each and every person who was in that room that morning. Peter, and the rest, then flooded the street filled with bewildered people, speaking in other languages, so that everyone could hear the Good News about what had happening and what was happening.

That had to have been amazing, ...and confusing, ...and exciting as Peter told about how the stories and rumors that had been spreading about Jesus being alive were actually, were amazingly, true and that they were witnesses to what that meant for the world.

But, as cool as that had to have been, that is not what I was wondering about this past week. I was wondering about when the church in the world *began*. I know that it sounds like I

am saying the same thing, but there is a difference. It is like the difference between conception and delivery. Life is in both, it is just that the first still needs time to fully become what it is destined to become.

Now, I know the temptation at this point is to say that the church was conceived when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and Jesus was made in her womb, but I'm not so sure that that is when the CHURCH was conceived. It is probably more accurate to say that that is when the Kingdom of Heaven came into the world in the form of a human.

So, when, then? When did it begin? When did the church take life? Well, although we don't have an official feast day associated with it, I think that it is arguable to say that the church started on a beach. It began when the first human beings became followers of Jesus. It was conceived at that amazing, maybe even miraculous, point in time when Jesus invited some human beings onto a path and into a mission, *and they said yes*, and the union of humanity and the mission God's Son took on a life.

It started on a beach. Jesus had been baptized by John in the Jordan. He had encountered temptation in the wilderness. He accepted His mission in the world. And now the church needed to be established for the sake of that mission for all people.

And so, Jesus went to the beach. He went to the beach and four individuals dropped everything and the church was brought to life. There was still much to do, there was still much to become, before the fullness of the church would be born on Pentecost, but in that moment of "Yes" the church took on life.

For the next three years, it developed and grew, lovingly contained and protected within the life of Christ. If we try to picture it as a developing baby in the womb, it developed hands and arms and feet with which to serve. It developed a heart with which to love. And it gained a brain within which to receive and store God's wisdom.

And as it grew physically, it also grew in purpose. They were shown miracles where blind found their sight, and the lame regained strength, and the lost found their way back home; and through those things they came to see that they had been gathered for a powerful work.

They were taught that it will be the meek that will be the heirs of creation, that one lost lamb was a priority over all the safe sheep back in the sheepfold; that prodigals will always have a home to come back to, if they choose; and that we should never leave unattended a person in need along the road.

They were brought to the understanding, as this infant church developed, that they were being made for a mission. They were being made for a mission that would not leave people in their misery and would not leave the world without a way out from the darkness.

It came to life on a beach when four individuals said "yes" to the Lamb of God. It was born when the Holy Spirit empowered it on Pentecost, and it became known as The People of the Way, and it lives on today as a sacred partnership of followers called the Body of Christ that brings life to the world.

That is important for us to hear, especially on this annual meeting day. Between services this morning we will hear about important things. We will talk about our 2017 budget. We will look at the result of our stewardship for this year and how we expect to allocate those generous funds. Leaders within the congregation who head commissions will have the opportunity to share their perspective on 2016, and possibly some vision into 2017. We may talk about attendance at worship, opportunities for volunteering, and we will take a look at how our buildings and grounds are holding up.

These are all important items in the running of a church organization. But, we need to hear that they are not our primary purpose for being. They are not the primary topics of the questions we should be asking of ourselves. Our annual meeting should be the opportunity to be reminded that we had a beginning on a beach and that we are to model ourselves in line with that beginning.

I wonder what that first church talked about when they had their “annual meetings”. What did their “strategic planning” look like? What questions did they ask and which ones should we be asking, if we wanted to be like the church that Jesus had in mind when he was walking that beach calling out to some fishermen in their boats?

How about:

1. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? What does it mean to be a follower of this guy who calls out to us just like he did to Peter, Andrew, James, and John?
2. When we look over to the one calling out to us, what are the parts of our lives are we willing to set aside, to leave behind, in order to follow? And what parts of our lives, those gifts that we have received from God, do we need to keep active, in order to effectively and authentically follow His Son?
3. Do we individually see ourselves as followers of Christ, and if we do, as the church, what does that look like? What should others who are not yet in the church see in us? Who should they see through us?
4. When we look at the others in this building, do we see them, do we see us, as partners on a sacred mission, or just some very nice and friendly people who we see occasionally when our Sundays happen to overlap with their Sundays?

The things that we typically hear about on Annual Meeting Sunday are important. But they are only important as far as they help us define and evaluate ourselves as The People of the Way, God’s church in the world.

Is the church fishers of people in God’s world, or do we simply own and operate a fish shop? One will change the world. The other will just be a place that smells like fish.

Our primary task is to cast nets for people and then to set them free, full of new life, out within the world. That is the calling of the church, then, now, and always.

Amen