

BRINGING LIGHT INTO THE WORLD
January 23, 2011 – Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

The Epiphany season continues to display Jesus as the light of the world. The readings from Isaiah continue the theme of light and darkness. The people are in the dark, and Jesus is the light. He is the new light, the new focus ... the one who brings us the knowledge of what God desires for us in the world.

Today, we have Matthew's account of the calling of the disciples. As I mentioned last week, after his baptism, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus begins to form a community. Out of faith, these first few men respond to Jesus' call to follow him. The challenge for us is to understand that Jesus now calls us, both as individuals and a Church. The question for us is, "Will we follow?" and "How will we follow?"

We can see from the Gospel that Jesus does nothing in isolation. He forms a community. This action reveals the nature of God. God chooses to work through us to work miracles in the world. There are two parts of Jesus' calling: part 1 – the invitation, "Follow me." And part 2 – "You will fish for people." The result of Jesus' invitation and definition of action is that the Church is born. We are the ones called to follow and fish!

Herb O Driscoll talks about how this story is our story. There is a need for us to claim it as our own. We might ask: "What's ahead?" "What's this about?" and "What have we gotten into?" What lies ahead for us is the threefold ministry of Jesus: preaching; teaching; and healing. We are to preach, proclaim our faith in Jesus. We are to teach what Jesus has taught us about the Kingdom of God ... its peace, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, justice and call to love. And, we are to, as Matthew describes Jesus healing ministry, "to cure every sickness and disease among the people," I particularly like that last one ... we are called to be healers of ourselves, others, society, institutions and the world!

So here we are this morning. We called to overcome the darkness with the light of God in Jesus Christ. Think of all the "darkness" that threatens to overcome us: bullying; cancer; heart disease; addiction; abuse; violence; homelessness; hunger; and war to name a few. The Call of the Church (and of us) is to bring the light of Jesus into this with respect; healing; freedom; safety; peace; security; shelter; food; and peace. Jesus' light shines into our lives. Our call is to shine his light into the world. We are to embrace Christ, follow him, and be part of God's movement to change the world.

How are we going to do this? Yesterday morning a challenge presented itself. It was one of the Saturday mornings when I didn't have much planned ... I even had a little time to myself! But the telephone rang. There was an issue. Some parishioners were preparing lunches for Kids Alley Café when a teacher from the music school shared that she found a homeless man sleeping on third floor of the parish hall. He begged for money from the volunteers. They dealt with him, but shared the concern with me.

My reaction was to go right to the Parish Hall. I met with the Music School director and talked about making sure no one sneaks into the building while they were here.

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Apparently this man hid in a classroom until everyone left. My concerns were about safety and security. There have been a rash of thefts in Haddonfield the past few weeks. What if a child or woman came to the music school? We weren't prepared to deal with the homeless man.

I called the police and made a report. Something the officer said as we talked was as cold as it was last night ... he didn't blame the guy for seeking some place warm for the night. When I got home, I began to think ... wasn't sad there was no place for the homeless to go? I know there are other issues involved with the homeless such as mental health and addiction ... but what are we to do? Is my responsibility only to protect the church people and the buildings? What is my calling? What would Jesus do? What is Jesus asking me to do?

More than 25 years ago I encountered a similar problem. I was a newly ordained deacon serving at St. Timothy's Church in Herndon, Virginia. Christmas Day, we learned that a local homeless man froze to death sleeping under a bridge in town. It had been a bitter cold night, like last night. I was saddened by the news. But even more important ... it resonated deep within me. Do something!

My Rector, Ralph, and I talked about the situation. He looked at me and told me ... then do something about it. I learned my first valuable lesson ... as a Rector ... when someone raises an issue ... gives him or her the task to do something! I went about exploring how to set up a homeless shelter among the churches. I figured that I would find a ready and willing audience among my fellow Christians. Boy, was I wrong!

Everywhere I turned I met with resistance. The churches were concerned what their members would say, about having those kind of people in their buildings, of the possible property lost and possible harm to their members. The local chief of police opposed me. He said that the homeless would stream out of Washington, DC to flood our neighborhoods! You see, we were at the end of the regular bus line at that time. Everywhere I turned, people, even parishioners, objected to the proposal.

The more I learned about the homeless, the more compelled I felt to act. I learned the homeless most often stay in a local area. They do not move around. If they did, don't you think that they would go to Florida in the winter? I would! No, these were often people displaced by suburban homes being built and the disappearance of what few support systems they had to rely on. I talked with Mitch Snyder in Washington, a homeless advocate. He gave me valuable advice and support in the face of growing opposition.

So on I charged, young, committed, answering the call to make a difference. I planed to open St. Tim's for two weeks at the beginning of November. No other Church came forward. When Ralph asked me what I was going to do, I said we'd open if only for two weeks. I planned to offer a hot dinner, a warm place to sleep for the night and breakfast and a bagged lunch.

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One week before the shelter was to open, The local Unitarian Church called and asked if there were still any openings to host! I asked them if they would like to take the last two weeks of November. Two days before ... the Baptist Church in town agreed to take the next two weeks. By the end of the program, we covered four months with the shelter program! I also had 20 volunteers from the Church willing to help!

That week, Mitch Snyder called and said he had 100 Army cots for me! Have you ever seen how much room that many cots take up? The next day, an Army supply sergeant called and said he was having one of his men deliver 200 blankets! Talk about miracles! So there we were ... ready the first night of November. I think all 20 volunteers had shown up! Dinner was cooking ... we were set.

But how do you get the word out to the homeless? I let the social workers in town know, informed all the churches ... but how do you get the word around? The homeless weren't going to pick up the Herndon times and say, "Oh look! St. Tim's has a place for me to stay!" The Washington Post didn't come to interview us about the shelter so the homeless could read it there ... how do people get there?

I was wondering, "What's next?" When a police car pulled up to the Church. Great, I thought, more hassles. The chief got out and another car pulled up ... a battered old Chevy. A young man got out and the chief brought him in. He was a young construction worker from West Virginia named Joe. The police found him sleeping in his car. Joe had family back home but couldn't find work there. He drove 6 hours to Herndon to work and sent most of the money home to his wife and children to pay bills and buy groceries.

Poor Joe was overwhelmed! Think about it ... 20 volunteers hovering over one man! I finally got people to leave Joe alone and sat down to chat with him. Joe looked around and said, "Who did you do all this for?" I looked at Joe and said, "For you, Joe." I think that was one of the moments that I felt closest to God. By the end of the season, St. Tim's and the other churches had housed nearly 200 people during the winter.

This story came streaming back to me yesterday. What is God calling us to do? Are we to start another homeless shelter? I think the invitations to act come over and over. Jesus calls us to be the light shining in the world and in the lives of people. What does Jesus want us to do? Maybe it's a homeless shelter, an elderly ministry, and the health center at St. Wilfrid's or more with St. Paul's in Camden. Maybe it's a children's or youth ministry, or a charter school ... I don't know. But if you have an idea, we need to talk!

The reality is that Jesus calls us today to follow him and to fight for people. We are the ones called to bring the light of Jesus Christ into our world today. We are to take up the preaching, teaching and healing ministry of Jesus. God, please help us to figure out what you would have us do. Jesus, fill our hearts with your light that we might go fishing for you. Anyone interested in helping me work on a shelter?