

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Third Sunday after Epiphany – January 22, 2017
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Matthew 4:12-23

For Reflection

"As we go forth into the coming year, let it not be in the haste of impetuous, forgetful delight, nor with the quickness of impulsive thoughtlessness. But let us go out with the patient power of knowing that the God of Israel will go before us."

- Oswald Chambers (1874-1917) early twentieth-century Scottish Baptist and Holiness Movement evangelist and teacher, best known for the devotional My Utmost for His Highest

Impetuous Choices

When Peter was a baby learning to crawl on the bed I'd grab him and say, "Don't fall off the precipice!" He liked being grabbed and I loved saying the word "precipice." Sure enough, when he was about two and a half, I came into the living room in time to hear him say to his action figures – poised at the edge of the sofa, "Pecipice! Pecipice!"

As I read our text for this morning the word "precipitous" kept rising to the top. Two sets of brothers, all fishermen, are called to follow a complete stranger into who-knows-what circumstances – and they "immediately" drop what they are doing and follow him. These were precipitous, impulsive, impetuous choices.

Precipitous means "extremely steep" – like the drop off a cliff – or a relatively high bed. It also means "extremely hasty or abrupt; done too quickly and without enough thought or planning." Being an English Major, I proceeded in an unrushed manner to look up synonyms and related words:

cursory, drive-by, flying, **gadarene**, headlong, helter-skelter, hurried, overhasty, pell-mell, precipitate, hasty, rash, rushed...

breakneck, breathtaking; headstrong, heady, hotheaded, impatient, **impetuous**, impulsive, **madcap**, reckless, unadvised; quick, rapid, speedy, swift; horseback, impromptu, makeshift, offhand, offhanded, off-the-cuff, rush, **slapdash**, snap, spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment; abrupt, sudden...

There are some great, descriptive words here. Did you know that the word "horseback" indicated hastiness? I also love the idea of our fisher-disciples were "madcap" and "slapdash" kind of guys – not what you'd usually ascribe to fishermen who spend hours with lines and nets attempting to lure in wild aquatic creatures.

And the word "gadarene" – what is that?

According to the free dictionary it is:

An ancient city of the Middle East southeast of the Sea of Galilee...described in the Bible as the place where Jesus cast demons out of a man and into a herd of swine, which then threw themselves into the sea.

Gad·a·rene * 'gadə rēn/ * **adjective**

involving or engaged in a headlong or potentially disastrous rush to do something

www.thefreedictionary.com/Gadarene

I challenge you to throw THAT into a conversation! “Don’t be so gadarene, girl!”

The opposite of gadarene, impetuous and precipitous would be:

deliberate, unhurried, unrushed...

calculated, calculating, measured; circumspect, foresighted, forethoughtful;

drawn-out, extended, long-term, prolonged; faltering, hesitant, hesitating,

tentative; dallying, dawdling, laggard, leisurely, or pokey, shilly-shallying, slow...

My husband could be described by many of these words. In fact, before we got married, I talked with my minister about my frustration at his slowness compared to my fastness. Her wisdom: “It is easier for a fast person to slow down than for a slow person to speed up.” John encourages me to think before acting or spending money. And occasionally I lead him into “just doing” something he wouldn’t normally just do. We balance each other out.

And for our son, who has a propensity for precipitous behavior – we model both self-regulation and mutual influence – the power of two to be better than either one.

Imagine my surprise in finding scriptural reference to this in Ecclesiastes:

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. 11 Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? 12 And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. **A threefold cord is not quickly broken.**

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

But like most scripture, it likes to keep us thinking and on our toes. The benefits of two-ness are lifted-up repeatedly here. But then it says, “A threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Three, not two. Does this indicate the presence of a child in a family? I don’t think so. It might mean the power of the court system to impose mutual respect between humans. I’m thinking not.

Being scripture I’m pretty sure this is theological. And that means the third party in a strong partnership is G-d – a “higher power” beyond ourselves – a willingness to consider an opinion and perspective that bridges or even supersedes either of ours.

And THAT, my beloveds, is what saves us all in the end – that Higher Power (HP) that plucks us from the edge of the precipice and sets us down in the meadow of reason.

And, remarkably, this same HP can knock us upside the head with an epiphany and send us running to the ends of the earth – just like those young, impetuous fisher-guys who immediately left the lake to follow an idealistic rabbi on a quest to overthrow the Roman Empire and establish a just and compassionate society.

I have moments of doubt – especially in budget committee meetings, as some of you know – wondering what we are doing here and if this is worth it. Those doubts flare up when a member moves away or an election turns the world upside down. But then – my husband talks me down from the ledge – or I recognize the generosity and compassion embedded in the budget – or I go to a gathering of 750,000 women, men and children whose hearts are bursting with love and hope and determination – and feel the strength of that three-fold cord holding us all up – along with millions all around the world. And I'm back on track – cleaning up our base-camp so we can go out from here to transform the world – one student, one client, one acting gig, one child or grandchild or homeless friend at a time.

So yes, our four fishermen getting up **immediately** to follow this guy Jesus can seem rather gadarene to us. But we haven't seen the three-fold cord of their experiences, hardships, relationships, and conversations with G-d which led up to this decision. And sometimes impetuosity is exactly what the situation calls for. They had three years to examine and regret their decision – a crucifixion to dissuade them and a resurrection to reignite their hopes and passions. From there they went on to transform the world. Who could have foreseen that? That's what we need hindsight for.

My son and husband went with me yesterday to the Million Woman March of the World. Numerous members of Mt. Hollywood UCC were strewn throughout the crowd – as evidenced by photos on Facebook and Instagram. Cousins, neighbors and friends from a lifetime were in the streets across the nation and planet. And those who couldn't march knitted hats and made signs and cheered and sent their hearts out on the sleeves of those who could represent them.

In Chicago, the streets were so full they had to halt the marching and turn it into a standing-still rally.

In L.A., the march was less a march and more of a milling-about on multiple square blocks – with some people arriving early, others leaving in the middle as more arrived late – so very L.A.

It was a tapestry of hope that couldn't be seen in our separate but equal voting booths. It was a well-planned orchestration of street theatre attended by the impetuous AND methodical, the introverted and extraverted, religious and secular, imaginative and scientific, gender-specific and not-so-specific alike.

It was evidence of that three-fold cord in rainbow hues – that we come to remember and celebrate and re-weave into our lives every week in this place.

Thanks be to G-d – and those madcap fishermen – for leading the way.

Scripture Reading for Sunday January 22, 2017 – Epiphany 3 – Year A

Matthew 4:12-23

2 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles 16 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." 17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

18 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. 19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." 20 **Immediately** they left their nets and followed him.

21 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. 22 **Immediately** they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

23 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.