

Disciples or Admirers?

Sermon for Epiphany 3, January 25, 2026

Readings: Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Sermon Text: Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Collect for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Book of Common Prayer

Hello friends, here it is a new year, a real winter, and the third Sunday after the Epiphany. Due to a massive snowstorm we are meeting online via Zoom. We are going to look back and remember the winter of '26, I can tell you that already.

A lot going on in the country but as always it is best to start with reflection on the biblical texts we have just heard.

We kicked off Epiphany with the baptism of Jesus, and last week we read John the Evangelist's account of Jesus meeting Peter and Andrew thanks to John the Baptist. The Baptist had pointed to Jesus and said "Behold the lamb of God."

Let's go meet him, thought Simon and Andrew. And so they did.

This week we hear Matthew's somewhat different account of Jesus beginning his ministry. In this telling it starts after John's arrest. Jesus went back north to Galilee and took up John's signature proclamation: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

And then on the shore of the Sea of Galilee he called Simon and Andrew, brothers, and James and John, sons of Zebedee. Maybe he knew them already from down by the river with the Baptist. Maybe they had met earlier at Simon's mother-in-law's house, as suggested in Luke's account (see Luke 4:38 and 5:1-11). But however they first met, once Jesus made the call, things were different.

Things are different here too.

As a huge storm system sweeps across the country; after what prime minister Carney of Canada called a rupture between the old system of international relationships and a new stark world of pure power, manifest in the crazy crisis over Greenland;

after three weeks of a massive infusion of federal agents in Minneapolis, leading to chaotic civil unrest and now another shooting death.

It's seems like a manifestation of the Yeats poem, "The Second Coming":
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The center no longer holds,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

What are to make of it all?

Regardless of where your political affiliations lie, we have a shared identity as humans—therefore equally worthy of being treated with dignity. Those of us here have a shared identity as Christians— therefore are grounded in what it means to be a follower a disciple of Christ.

Let's take a look at what that means in more detail.
First, hear again the message, the proclamation: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near!"

Turn around—and see what God is doing in the world! Come, join me in bringing about the new reign of love!

In other words, there is hope even in this power-ruled world.

ly was a compelling message to those called, first Simon peter and andrew, John and James, the tax collector Matthew. Or perhaps better, Jesus was a compelling person. Come and see, he had told Simon and Andrew down by the river—and they spent the afternoon with him. They had time with him, they abided with him, as the Greek work is translated elsewhere. Abide with me.

And then, follow me. And so they did.

Eventually he gathered twelve core disciples—a number resonating with the 12 tribes of Israel, as well as many other followers, including Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus from Bethel.

Much much later there was Matthew from Millbrook, Ben from Ohio, Marli for Hawaii, Jean from White Plains, Penelope from South Carolina—all sorts.

Called to see the world through the eyes of Jesus, and to act in the world as he showed us how. To become who God has created us to be, to heal the broken world.

Jesus started with twelve disciples and a loose group of followers. There's a couple of billion Christians in the world today—by far the largest single religion. Sixty percent of Americans identify as Christians.

So why is there division and hatred and conflict—even among Christians?

I wish I knew.

But I think perhaps it is a long, long process, a long game God is playing to pull us into the this kingdom that is always coming but has so far yet to arrive in power.

But our job is not to reap the harvest; it is to sow the seeds and work the field. To be light and leaven, and to be witnesses, practitioners of the way of Christ. To be disciples, not just admirers of Jesus. To abide with him, and stay the course when it gets rough.

Let me illustrate this reflection with a story I heard a friend tell long ago (I think it was first told by the small b baptist theologian James McClendon). First a bit of biography (thank you Wikipedia).

Clarence Jordan was born in Talbotton, Georgia, in 1912 the seventh of ten children of a prominent white family. From an early age, Jordan was troubled by the segregation and injustice that he perceived in his community. He earned a degree in agriculture in 1933 but became convinced that the roots of poverty were spiritual as well as economic. He went to seminary and earned a degree in theology and a Ph.D. in the Greek New Testament. He was ordained as a Southern Baptist minister and got married.

In 1942, the Jordan and his wife and a few other families moved to a 440-acre tract of land near Americus, Georgia, to create an interracial, Christian farming community. They called it Koinonia a word meaning 'communion' or 'fellowship' that in Acts 2:42 is applied to the earliest Christian community.

The Koinonia partners bound themselves to the equality of all persons, rejection of violence, ecological stewardship, and common ownership of possessions.

Sounds like they were trying to live like Jesus taught us. Live the kingdom way

And for awhile they lived in relative peace. However, as the Civil Rights Movement progressed, white citizens of the area increasingly perceived Koinonia as a threat. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Koinonia became the target of a stifling economic boycott and repeated violence, including several bombings. When Jordan sought help from President Eisenhower, the federal government refused to intervene, instead referring the matter to the governor of Georgia. The governor, a staunch supporter of racial segregation, responded by ordering the Georgia Bureau of Investigation to investigate Koinonia's partners and supporters for purported Communist ties.

Now's here the story my friend told me.

As this persecution was building in the early fifties Clarence approached his brother, Robert Jordan, who later became a state senator and justice of Georgia's Supreme Court and asked him to serve as legal representative of the Koinonia community.

Robert responded: "Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got."

"We might lose everything too, Bob."

"It's different for you."

"Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said, 'Yes.' What did you say?"

"I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point."

"Could that point by any chance be – the cross?"

"That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not up on the cross. You want to get up there with him. I'm not getting myself crucified."

"Then I don't believe you're a disciple, Bob. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple."

During the hard winter of 1776 the continental army under George Washington was in retreat and hunkered down near Trenton. Desertions were rampant, prospects were bleak. Lot of snow that year too—and these folks were living in tents, rags on their feet. But on December 16 Thomas Paine published a

pamphlet that began with these words: “These are the times that try men’s souls.” Washington read this to his troops. No sunshine patriot or summer soldier they. Two weeks later, on Christmas Day 1776, they crossed the Delaware and won their first victory, reviving spirits, proving they were not yet beaten. It was a major turning point in the long war of independence.

These are also times that try the soul—in many ways quite different from those of our country’s founding 250 years this year. But perhaps also in many ways the same. And so we are called to the same hope in a free and equal future, and as Christians, as disciples, to the same commitment to the love and forgiveness ethics of the kingdom, and a willingness to follow Jesus wherever he calls us.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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