

**THE CALL OF LOVE**  
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January 25, 2009  
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Mark 1:14-20**

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

\* \* \*

This past Tuesday, President Obama waved goodbye to former President Bush, turned and strode into the U.S. Capitol, a temple of democracy. He ate lunch with 200 invited guests, a fair representation of men and women, black and white. They ate in Statuary Hall, a hall not unlike the Greek pantheon.

Not surprisingly the 100 statutes in Statuary Hall are nearly all white men. I might not have noticed or cared about those statutes had Pat Donohoe not shared her reflections on the dreams still unfulfilled in this nation. ("Yes, I, Too, Have a Dream") And, by the way, the demographics of Statuary Hall are not a digression from the path we're on this morning.

Tuesday our nation bid farewell to one president and welcomed another. We've seen it many times before.

This time, however, for many people in our nation and around the world, it felt different. We don't know if anything worthwhile or lasting will come of it, but it certainly feels like one of those rare transitional times, as much to do with these peculiar times as with any particular person. Transitional times arise infrequently for nations and individuals. But they do arise.

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

This past Tuesday had that kind of feel about it. I'm not saying our new President is the Messiah. Heaven help him if he is. Heaven help him if he isn't. Heaven help him, period.

You know and I know it's a little frightening when people invest too much hope in a single person. And yet, what are we going to do? Will we wallow in cynicism and fret away this opportunity to repent, to turn around, and return as a nation to true and tested values that make for genuine peace and prosperity?

For a generation or more we have been a nation at war with itself, nearly as divided as we were in the mid 19th century when brothers and sisters took up arms against each other. At that time it seemed that the rift between the states would never end or never heal.

And then came a moment of grace. A transitional time arose.

I just finished reading Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, which documents Abraham Lincoln's extraordinary embrace of rivals and even enemies. Despite the popular thirst for vengeance against the defeated South, Lincoln refused recriminations. That stance reflected his well-cultivated habits of compassion. In fact, much to the displeasure of his military chiefs, he next to never approved the execution of army deserters.

Love is a gift to one and all. It's ours to cultivate—or not.

*With malice toward none, with charity for all, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.* [Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Mar. 4, 1865]

At that moment our nation was offered an opportunity not unlike the opportunity offered to Jonah in today's Old Testament lesson. [God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell the people Jonah hated most that God loved them. Jonah refused.] You can get rid of your enemies in two ways, said Lincoln. Kill them or make them your friend.

We can fight to the death or we can unclench our fists and offer each other a helping hand. That's true on a national level and it's true on a personal level. You can fight to the death or you can unclench your fist and offer an open hand.

As [special envoy to the Middle East] Senator George Mitchell remarked this week: humans create conflicts; humans can undo them. And here's something else that's true: where there's a will there is usually a way. Jonah preferred the hateful way but love relentlessly pursued him and nudged him back on the way that leads to peace. Love always seeks us out.

*As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people,"* which is to say, let go of what you're clinging to for the moment and I will show you how to draw people into a beloved community. *And immediately they left their nets and followed him.*

That was then. This is now.

Jesus no longer walks into our lives quite like that. But love still finds us and bids us follow. It's a choice we make every day if not every hour. We can stay safely where we are or we can step out in faith. We can cling to greed and envy, to fear and loathing, to hatred and indifference, to prejudice and bigotry, or we can leave that behind and follow the call of love to build a land where God's dream of justice, freedom, and equality comes true for all people.

Sojourner Truth heard the call of love and bravely stood up and walked out of her bondage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton heard the call of love and bravely stood up and spoke out. Rosa Parks heard the call of love and bravely sat down. Without those brave women this present moment of grace for our nation would be unthinkable.

The call of love is continuous but all too often our hearts are noisy and cluttered. The call of love comes in the thick of things, amidst our daily busyness. The call of love invites us to learn another way of being in the world with others. Sometimes it's a call to a different career or job. But far more often it's an invitation to a different attitude and a different practice, one small, uncomfortable step at a time.

I don't know how or where love is calling you today, but I'm pretty sure if you will listen in these next few minutes of silence, you will get a clue.