

Trinity Church
February 8, 2009

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
RCL, Year B, 5 Epiphany

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Jesus! the Name that charms our fears
and bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears;
'tis life and health and peace.*

*Hear him, ye deaf; ye voiceless ones
your loosened tongues employ;
ye blind, behold, your Savior comes;
and leap, ye lame, for joy!*

I had just finished a two-year stint as Chaplain to St. John the Baptist School in New Jersey, it was spring, the weather was fine, and I was heading West. I owned a Karmann Ghia back then, a Volkswagen with a sporty body, that I had picked up for \$1,000.00. The windows were rolled down, and as I barreled across the Pennsylvania Turnpike, I was singing myself along: "*Jesus! the Name that charms our fears/and bids our sorrows cease,/ 'tis music in the sinner's ears/ 'tis life and health and peace.*" Those were the days when I would have probably followed up with Peter, Paul and Mary's song, "*How many roads must a man walk down?*"

Yes, I was free and filled with the joy of the Spirit of the Gospel. I could resonate with Jesus' reply to Simon and Andrew, James and John, when they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." Jesus said, "Let us be going on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do."

Just as I was thinking about these things, the traffic on the turnpike slowed down and then stopped. I was stuck in a backup that was miles long. I looked around, and there was a billboard off the road that read, "You've got a friend in Pennsylvania." "Pennsylvania," I said. "Looks like a beautiful state. I wouldn't mind doing ministry in Pennsylvania."

On the face of the Gospel story today, Jesus has it all. He's living in a town he loves and knows well, Capernaum. He has friends around him in Peter and Andrew, James and John. He has a local friendly synagogue to preach in. He was able to heal Peter's mother-in-law, and his reputation as a healer had people coming to his door. Things weren't so hectic that he didn't have time to go out and pray. This seems ideal.

But there was a restless urging in his Spirit, an essential freedom in God's love for him, an enthusiasm to move on. "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." Jesus ended up going all over Galilee, proclaiming the message. He was eager to meet strangers, eager to preach in the synagogues, and when he encountered demons, they obeyed him.

St. Paul had this same restless Spirit that drove him beyond the familiar in different ways. He tried to explain himself to the rough-and-tumble congregation in Corinth, a rough-and-tumble town. "I am under an obligation," he writes, "laid on me by Christ." Wherever I go, I must preach the gospel. I am free. I can preach the gospel to anyone, anywhere. Among Jews, I kept the law and lived like I always have as a Jew myself in order that Jews might listen to me. To those who live as Gentiles do, I lived as the Gentiles, in order that I could preach to them. To those who

were poor and weak, I became myself poor and weak so that they could see that I was serious about the Gospel. "I do it all for the sake of the gospel," he writes, "so that I may share in its blessing."

Paul and Jesus both were tireless in this one ambition: to proclaim the Gospel. They were as those prophets about whom Isaiah wrote, "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not be faint."

As we witness the ministry of Jesus bursting out of the familiar and the Gospel proclaimed everywhere to everyone, we can see that this joyful freedom and restless Spirit are a part of the Gospel itself. Part of who we are as we follow him. The Spirit blows us beyond our comfort level to proclaim the gospel to children in the Sunday School, or in an adult class, or tutoring in a rough school, or praying at the bedside of those who are ill and cannot pray themselves. Each time the gospel takes the shape of the circumstances in order that we can be heard.

Well, just as I was looking at the billboard that said that I had a friend in Pennsylvania, the traffic began to thin out and move again — West. A few weeks later, I got a call from a parish in Pennsylvania, asking me to come and talk to them about doing ministry there. I remembered the sign I was stuck in front of on the turnpike, and did the interview and began ministry in a place I had never lived before. Jesus was the friend I had in Pennsylvania.

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