Sermon on Epiphany 3A
*Crisis=Danger + Opportunity: How Following Christ Helps Us Choose Wisely*

I stand before the counter pondering my decision, will it be the raison bran or the carrot pineapple muffin? Today I choose the carrot pineapple.

What is it that triggers a decision? Is it information? In the case of mundane questions such as “what shall I have for lunch?” it would seem to be information: looking at what’s in the fridge or the cupboard, whether I should cash in that A&W coupon today or not, whether I stick to my New Year’s resolution to have a salad for lunch 5x a week!

In the case of more crucial decisions we tend to ask the question “What’s the right thing to do?” with more urgency. Is she/he the right person to build a life with? How do I parent this particular child differently from my other child who has a totally different personality?

Of course, this way of thinking about decisions is still quite information based. We come to the question “what’s the right thing to do?” weighing evidence, looking for arguments one way or the other and seeking to learn from the experience of others.

None of this is bad per sae, it’s the way we do things in late modernity. Of course, we can see immediately the limitations of such an approach; how much information is enough information? We are finite beings so there is no such thing as certainty, is there? Where is the point at which we take the plunge, when we step out in faith and act?

It turns out that though we think we know how to plan for happiness and prosperity by relying on our rational minds, isn’t actually how we make most of our important decisions

Psychology is gradually opening up our understanding to the complex reality of how it works; information is a part of it but when it comes to the actual point of decision our emotions and instincts take over, even when we feel we’re being very deliberate and rational.

If this is the case, and I think there’s no doubt it is, how do we open to this reality in a way that allows us to live well and not merely serve our own selfish interests?

The Biblical perspective, which happens to coincide with many other great insights from the ancient world is that the true path lies by way of *honing* our instincts and training our emotions so that more of the encounters we have with people, with the world, the decisions we need to make are a cooperation with God’s Spirit.

The situation in our texts today provides us with a particularly important example of this process: “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee…. From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

The Gospel texts agree that Jesus didn’t begin to announce the Kingdom of God or Heaven until he heard that John had been arrested. Somehow it was the sign he needed to step onto the stage.

John F. Kennedy, in a speech he gave back in 1959, popularized the notion that the Chinese symbol for “Crisis” was drafted by taking the symbol for “danger” and “opportunity” and combining them.

This idea was hugely popular back in the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s until Chinese linguists pointed out that it wasn’t true, that’s not how Chinese symbols work. But, Kennedy’s larger point still holds!

Sometimes it takes a crisis to focus our minds, to engage our instincts and emotions so that we have the will to do what rational insight alone will never get us to do.

It may be that John’s arrest was simply a sign to Jesus that if the revolution that had begun at his baptism by John was to take hold, now was the time. Or perhaps it was that gut check that came to Jesus in the midst of danger that now the opportunity was indeed right to begin his ministry.

We know from the preceding story which we’ll look at on the first Sunday in Lent, that Jesus, after his baptism, had fought the powers of darkness in the desert.

Now, one of their earthly representatives had snuffed out the Baptist, the one who had come to prepare His way. Jesus knew he could wait no longer; the darkness had reached its height; it was time for the light to shine.

Many times I’ve received someone in study and the conversation goes something like this, “I knew there was something wrong but I just tried to pretend it wasn’t there; I just hoped it would go away, but then she told me she was going to leave if I didn’t stop drinking, cheating, gambling, being emotionally abusive” (fill in the blank).

“Now I know I need to do something!” In that personal conversation is the same conviction, “darkness should not win, it’s time for the light.” Crisis=danger+opportunity (just not in Chinese!)

But what? How to re-train our triggers so that our instincts, so that our emotions find a partnership with our best rational intentions?

What do I tell such a person at such a time? Well, I usually say, “I don’t have a packet of information for you, an answer, but I do have a proposition for you, become a follower!”

The first step towards this kind of integration is to do something counter-intuitive, something that does not sit well with our individualism: begin to follow!

The first sign of the Kingdom, the first sign of the light spreading in the gospels is that ordinary Galileans become followers of Jesus

Going it alone is like someone with artistic ability but who doesn’t have any materials to work with.

The radical message for our siloed, individualistic culture is that far from having more liberty and freedom by not following, we have less; our limited perspective creating illusion of self-reliance when often it is self-delusion.

But of course I don’t recommend just following for the sake of following; people who have the instinct to follow often follow the wrong teacher, the philosophy that will turn out badly for them.

if it’s integration we’re looking for, the honing of all that will make living good, our minds, our bodies, our emotions, even our instincts, then I commend to you the One who holds all those things together, the One through Whom the World was made, The Word made flesh.

And the good news is that if we say “yes” to being his follower we find that our own insights, observations and questions have a sounding board, have a reference point that doesn’t take away our initiative or freedom, but precisely because we’re in relationship with the Word who made all things, who is the Designer of all, we find our liberty and our power enhanced!

Following Christ begins to check our unhelpful impulses as we daily “check-in” with Him!

But, and this is crucial, this “following” does not take place on our own, it’s not “me and Jesus” but being part of a community that is the key to our growth.

The very first thing Jesus does is to call the first followers into a community, the first sign of the Kingdom, earlier than the remarkable healings. It is the new community that is *the* sign that something new is afoot.

It was the community that allowed them to challenge the cultural norms of familial and vocational security.

The reason we don’t merely “go to Church” is that “we are the Church,” the sign of the Kingdom, called to a sisterhood and brotherhood that may not, initially be nearly as emotionally compelling as our blood relations but, if we think about, the only foundation of a society where me, myself and I isn’t the definition of what is good and helpful.

This is why Paul has it in for his new friends in Corinth; there is no personality cults in the Church; there is not church of Peter, Paul or Apollos, not even a separate “Jesus Church” as if Jesus was just one among several personalities, like different varieties of potted begonias.

denominations need to be especially careful of this; we all need to work at our fundamental unity as vigorously as we can; we are all part of the “one, holy, catholic [universal], and apostolic [missional] Church.”

As we unite together we’ve entered the very space where we are freer to hone our instincts, to bring our emotions and our rational thinking into God’s service;

Perhaps you were once a follower but have let it slide; perhaps you’ve been coming to Church but have not found the control in your emotional life you thought would somehow automatically happen

Following, Joining, taking risks together, this is the fundamental letting go, the step of faith that opens for us the materials for a beautiful life, the freedom to choose wisely.