"Here Am I, Send Me" – Rev. Denise Schiavone

Last Sunday, we heard Luke's account of Jesus being nearly hurled off a cliff, a prophet rejected in his own hometown. This morning we have the crowds pressing in to hear Jesus speak—and we learn of the call of the first disciples, who left their livelihood and all that they knew—to follow Jesus.

From a crowd enraged, to one yearning to be near this enticing prophet, the leap can seem jarring, until we consider what lies between these two Gospels.

When Jesus passed in the midst of the crowd, escaping almost certain death, he did not go into hiding, in fear for his life. Nor did he say, this isn't really worth it—this work is too hard, the reward too little.

No, in the passage just before this morning's Gospel, Luke tells us Jesus leaves his precarious position on the edge of that cliff and goes to Capernaum to teach. Not only to teach, but to encounter and engage the crowds, including a man possessed by a demon: a man considered unclean, avoided by his own community. Jesus goes on to lay hands on and cure all those sick with various diseases. From these acts of healing and restoration, the crowds are amazed. They look for Jesus. They follow him.

At the Lake of Gennesaret, the disciples have spent a long day toiling at work, when Jesus directs them to put their nets into deep water. At this point, we can imagine they are tired—possibly exasperated by Jesus's command. Simon tries to explain they've been at it all night, without success. Yet even so, he obeys, and they let down their nets.

Luke's account says simply that after their nets become full, they follow Jesus. Matthew and Mark's Gospels tell us Jesus beckons, "Follow me," and that at

"...at once they left their nets and went with him." Whatever the exact details of the exchange, it is clear that Jesus invited, and the disciples accepted.

Rarely are we called today to sacrifice as the first disciples did: to leave our professions, our families and communities, and venture into the complete unknown. But we are nonetheless called to move out of our comfort zones, to foray from our familiar places, to follow in Jesus's footsteps.

A few weeks ago, members of our refugee ministry were discussing the Afghan family our church is sponsoring: how they were settling in, the fact that they took quick initiative to get jobs, and that they express a strong gratitude for Christ Church's support. In fact, the family has on several occasions expressed their desire to help others in the future—as they say, "To give back."

The group's discussion shifted to what Christ Church might be able to help this family accomplish, beyond fleeing their country and finding a safe place to live in the U.S. Someone commented that it would be nice if we could help them achieve "The American Dream."

The sentiment gave me great pause, as I wondered, does such a dream still exist? A dream that anyone—no matter their class or race or background—can achieve success, that upward mobility is within reach for all, if only you work hard enough. It's a nice notion, but I believe the American Dream is only a dream for some. For others, it's as elusive as grasping a puff of smoke from the air. For still others, the dream can be more of a nightmare.

Take the students at any one of a dozen Historically Black Colleges and Universities targeted nationwide this week with bomb threats that coincided with the beginning of Black History Month. From among them, Spellman

College student Saigan Boyd commented, "I'm just ultimately tired of dealing with this level of unsolicited hatred...I'm just tired of being terrorized like how my grandparents were."

Contrast this with one popular argument against the very existence of systemic racism in our country. People of this mindset often point to America's "progress" in advancing people of color: for example, in electing a Black president and a Black Vice President. The claim is that racist incidents are isolated ones, certainly not born of, woven through, and perpetuated by the very institutions we hold dear. But beyond bomb threats, other recent events reflect how non-incidental, non-random the problem really is.

Consider the banning of books and conversation about racism in some schools, because it might somehow disturb white children.

Consider elected officials in places like Georgia pursuing changes in voting laws that would largely suppress Black people's voices.

Consider how communities of color have been disproportionately devastated by a deadly pandemic that has taken jobs, homes, and lives.

Consider the debates over putting the first Black woman on the Supreme Court—a woman of the highest qualifications and credentials—and whether that is "fair" to White candidates or not.

In the midst of all this, organizations nationwide are celebrating Black History month. My own employer has an entire communications campaign devoted to inclusion and diversity. We run historical pieces about Martin Luther King and

profiles of staff who advocate for social justice causes. We call this "social innovation."

And yet, many would argue our social innovation is painfully slow to progress—some might say we're actually taking steps backwards—as people of color continue to experience inequities and injustices on a daily basis.

Debates and opposing positions aside, I'm more concerned with what is in some ways a much simpler question: How are we Christians called to respond to injustice in the world?

Admittedly, just because a question seems simple doesn't mean the answer will be. But surely, our common response as members of the Body of Christ does not limit our concern to one month of the year, or to one day each January when we honor one man who gave his life for the notion of justice espoused by the so-called American Dream.

As Americans, we may have great ambivalence over the American dream. But as Christians, we should have no ambivalence in the Gospel's message that God's love is for *all* people. That Jesus came to share that good news with not just those in his hometown, but with people far and wide, people whom others chose to ignore, neglect, and persecute, and that he invites us to follow him in healing, restoring, and reconciling a broken world.

This invitation does not stand alone. It comes with agency: that as Jesus's disciples, our strength comes not from us, but rather, as St. Paul says, from God's grace working within us. Out of this agency, Jesus invites us to action—action such as he took throughout his own ministry: traveling from the shores of Lake Gennesaret to bring communities to wholeness. That is our benchmark.

Not the American dream, not our annual "celebrations" of Black history, or our progress in putting people of color in positions of power.

Social justice is not a single month, movement, or ministry; it's not a sign or a slogan or a symbol. It lies within the very essence of what we are called to in our baptismal covenant: to seek and serve Christ in all people, to strive for justice and peace. Seek, serve, strive: those verbs are not passive ones; they call us to thoughtful and deliberate action on behalf of our fellow human beings.

How will we respond to this invitation, as storm clouds churn and the darkness of divisiveness threatens our way of life? Will we remain in our boats, floating safely in the shallows? Or we will follow our Lord to deeper waters and shores unknown? Will we ignore the rampant inequities that exist in school systems, housing, employment, and our justice system? Will we sit back and hope it all goes away, or that someone else—the Dr. Kings and the Rosa Parks of the world—will take bold action on our behalf?

Or, will we choose some kind of action? Will we allow ourselves to consider our own positions of privilege—and to submit to discussions that may make us deeply uncomfortable. Can we look at ourselves in the mirror and question our own perceptions and biases that influence—consciously and unconsciously—how we treat others?

Will we choose to fall to our knees and say, Jesus, I am a sinner? Like Paul, will we admit we are unfit to be a disciple of Jesus—but yet, "by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain..."

Christians responding to injustice may discover many different ways to address the problem. But certainly, indifference is not an option. Ambivalence is not an

option. Apathy is not an option. The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu said it well: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

As followers of Jesus, we do not have the luxury of sitting on the fence. Striving for justice is not something we can contain to the month of February, as if somehow, it's excessive to talk about it the other 11 months. Our baptismal covenant is in place 24/7, 365 days of the year.

And as a man of action, Jesus gave clear directions and example to live by. God incarnate walked the earth not as a hailed king, but as a man on the margins himself. And he tells us time and again, in word and in deed: What you do to others, you do to me. What you do to the least of these, you do to me.

There is no ambiguity around the fact that we as Christians must respond to injustice. Our specific calls may differ according to our life circumstances and gifts. But our common life as disciples of Christ compels us to respond by choosing action over apathy, and electing the common response of love.

Will we seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself? Will we strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

We can answer this in our worship in almost rote fashion, without much thought to how it applies to everyday life. We can, as Isaiah says, not look with our eyes, not listen with our ears. We may—either knowingly or unknowingly—turn our gaze from the suffering of our brothers and sisters. But God says to us, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Even when our nets feel empty, when we are tired or uncomfortable or conflicted, we can choose to keep casting out into deep waters. We can decide to actively engage every day in the covenant we have made to help move God's kingdom toward healing and wholeness. Not only despite our inadequacies and brokenness, but by the grace of God within us, as we respond, Here I am Lord, Send Me.