

I believe the proudest I have ever been of my wife, Barbara, was when she was ordained as one of the Diocese of Virginia’s first vocational deacons. It capped nearly 10 years of call, challenge, change and hard work for her, as she left a comfortable job in banking to go to graduate school, earning a dual degree in social work and Christian education from VCU and UPS, and then discerning a call to the diaconate and participating in two years of classes in the diocese’s first version of its now nationally recognized Deacon School.

Bishop Shannon ordained her and four others nearly seven years ago at St. Alban’s in Annandale, and many of you accompanied Abbott to the service. With the exception of the marriage ceremony, I have never found any language in our prayer book more stirring than those in the ordination rite for deacons. During the examination the bishop addresses the ordinands with these words:

As a deacon in the Church, you are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. You are to assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God’s Word and Sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time.

I must admit that I giggled just a bit when I heard those last words as “other duties as assigned”: Who knew that an HR manager had a hand in drafting the prayer book and had inserted this phrase so often used as job description’s last bullet point into such a solemn and joyful rite? I was reminded of that phrase again just two weeks ago at the session in the chapel when Abbott described how she felt a visceral call to her new position as the Canon to the Ordinary. She outlined for us a list of the many significant responsibilities she will have in the Diocese of California, and at the end were those words: “other duties as assigned.”

When Abbott asked me to preach today – and thank you, Abbott, for this privilege of preaching that you have extended to me during the past several years – I looked at today’s Gospel and again heard echoes of “other duties as assigned” in the scene where Jesus first calls Simon, Andrew, John and James to be disciples.

The progression of the readings during this season of Epiphany is among the most powerful in the liturgical year. It starts with the revelation of the Christ child to the magi, followed by John’s baptism, the calling of the first disciples, and the beginning of Jesus’s teaching and healing mission. Epiphany’s themes of manifestation, message, invitation, challenge, summons, and response are tightly woven in Mark’s concise language.

The opening verse is among the most familiar in the Gospel:

... 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.”

Perhaps their familiarity and Mark’s fast story-telling pace lead us to overlook some of the narrative’s depth and nuance. Jesus begins his mission only after John is arrested: the prophet’s duties have ended, and we know he will soon be executed, foreshadowing at the start how Jesus’s mission will also end in arrest and execution. But the focus is on Jesus’s first proclamation of the gospel, the good news of God. It’s the long-awaited news: the time has finally come, and God is accomplishing what he has long promised. He has returned to His people and reclaimed the throne. God is king, not Herod, not Caesar, nor any of the other pretenders to the crown. Neither

they nor any of the other things of this world that distract us from God can have any power over us if we pay attention.

“The kingdom of God has come near”: God is on the move, and we must be as well: repenting, changing our hearts, redirecting our steps, walking a different way. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry emphasizes this by calling the church the Jesus Movement.

Jesus's call to Simon and Andrew again emphasizes movement: “Follow me.” And then there is that haunting phrase “I will make you fish for people.” In some ways, I still prefer the King James Version, even though it is not gender inclusive, “I will make you to become fishers of men.” It's not just that the antique language emphasizes Jesus's word play (*fishermen* turned to *fishers of men*), but I also find more intriguing the first part of the clause “I will make you to become” instead of “I will make you fish,” implies less the compelling and more the changing and transforming.

Our identities are wrapped up not only in what we believe but also in what we do: what we profess and our professions. Jesus summoned the disciples to follow him on the first steps of his movement and promised that he would change them. Jesus challenges them to a change of direction and purpose but without starting from scratch or annihilating their distinct personalities and talents. They may be leaving their nets behind, but not their gifts. These first four disciples are all fishers: people whose profession depends on patience, energy, optimism, and persistence – just the characteristics needed for those who will be given “other duties as assigned.”

The portion of this passage that has always given me most pause is the immediacy of their response to Jesus's summons and their leaving behind not only the tools of their trade but their father and all the familiar boundaries of their lives. In the King James Version instead of “immediately” the word is “straightway,” implying not just the suddenness but the undistracted focus. They seem to have no second thoughts and let nothing get between them and following Jesus's call to travel beyond their accustomed limits.

I doubt that I would have been able to do that. That courage and focus to move to something so new is what continues to fill me with admiration for Barbara when she followed her path to the diaconate and now for Abbott as she follows her new call to California.

I know that Barbara had moments of self-doubt along the way, and I suspect that Abbott, as well many of us, may be facing the coming weeks and months with some anxiety and uncertainty. God will not assign us more duties than we can handle, if we face the future with all hearts open and approach our journeys not as a series of tasks to be finished but a process in which we can delight, as we discover (and rediscover) our strengths and acknowledge and face our fears.

Just as the disciples who followed Jesus carried with them their talents as fishers, Abbott will be bearing on her journey the same gifts with which she has inspired St. Andrew's: loving persistence, righteous passion, careful planning, and attentive leadership. St. Andrew's will soon embark on our new journey with the same diverse gifts that have made us a beloved community: welcoming all no matter who they are, accepting differences, treasuring traditions while being willing to evolve, giving generously, and facing our fears with faithful resiliency.

Our journeys won't be easy, but God will be with us. All will be well.