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Third Sunday after Epiphany  
January 27, 2008

Isaiah 9:1-4  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23

Sometimes I'm not sure how to follow the Gospel.

I've spent all week following and thinking about the news from the Rafah Crossing in Gaza.

The border between Gaza – one of the Palestinian territories in Israel – and Egypt is just seven and a half miles long.

The people of Gaza, as you probably know, have been trapped inside their state since January 17.

On the Gaza Strip, 1.5 million people live on a strip of land 25 miles long and three to seven miles wide, shut inside a thick corrugated metal fence.

On Wednesday, some Palestinians broke through the fence with explosives and other dangerous equipment, over the border into Egypt.

Not to riot, not to escape, not to become refugees, although I'm sure some have, but to go shopping!

They've bought cooking oil, flour, water, detergent, medications, and livestock.

And I'm just struck by this flood of people bursting out of imprisonment, poverty, violence, and isolation – because most of their parents and grandparents fled or were expelled from their homes when Israel became a nation in 1948.

to buy food, to see relatives, to show that they have not been destroyed.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about that flood of people, hundreds of thousands of them, pouring through holes in that corrugated metal wall, so determined to be free to live their lives and to get what they need.

And I think to myself, if Jesus is anywhere in the world right now, he is there.

If you wanted to meet Jesus, and you asked me where you could go to meet him, I would say, go to Gaza.

Go to the Rafah Crossing. You'll see him, there.

I'm absolutely sure of it.

Now, you would think that if I knew I would see Jesus at Rafah, in Gaza, I would be going there myself.

And I have often thought this.

On September 11, I knew I would see Jesus if I went to Manhattan.

As the war in Iraq as gone on and on, I knew I would see Jesus if I went there.

Jesus is easier to see in places of great pain and struggle,

because that's where it's easiest to see and understand the resurrection.

Someone said to me once, "Jesus didn't come to make bad people into good people, he came to make the dead live."

When we see people living, finding hope, surviving, still able to love and care for each other in the midst of great hardship, that is when we can see Jesus.

That is when we can see the kingdom of God!

But so, why am I here right now?

Why aren't I on a plane right now? (Even if I waited until AFTER the Annual Meeting!)

I mean, I have an apartment, I have a job doing ministry with all of you,

And I could say that there is also struggle here, and that Jesus is here too, among us, and I can see him here, too.

And that would ALL be true.

When Jesus called his first disciples to follow him,

he called them in the place where they lived.

They were fishermen. They lived down the road from him.

They had their nets in the water, and Jesus came to speak to them.

It's like Jesus finding you at work, or at your school, or in the middle of whatever

it is you do everyday,

and saying, "I have something to teach you."

"This is what you do, every day, and I want to help you transform it into a work that is from God."

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

We are called in the places that we are.

We're called to follow Jesus – to know him, to study his words,  
to look for him around us, in our everyday lives.

To offer hope, to offer hospitality, to stand up for the oppressed and the  
marginalized.

And so, the people of Israel and Palestine can be part of our everyday lives.

We are called with the gifts that we already have,  
we aren't called to be something that we're not.

We're not called to go to Rafah or Iraq just because.

The kingdom of God is all around us.

And yet, Jesus did not leave Simon and Andrew at their nets or in their village.

He didn't encourage them only to be better fisherman.

He called them to become something new.

He called them still to be fisherman, to be who they were,  
but also, to be transformed.

Now, Simon and Andrew left everything to follow Jesus.

They left their lives as fishermen behind, they left their father,  
and eventually they left home and their communities  
to follow Jesus to Jerusalem.

I don't know what Jesus is calling you to do, but I'm not sure it's necessarily to  
leave everything you know behind.

But I do know that Jesus is calling you,  
and all of us, to be transformed.

Not so much to go from being bad to being good,  
but to move in our lives, from death to life.

This is what it means that Jesus has saved us.

That wherever there is death in our lives,

Jesus invites us to find life again:

In our personal lives, in our work lives,  
and out in the scope of the whole world.

We don't have to go to Rafah,

but the people of Gaza and the people of Israel are our neighbors,  
they are our brothers and sisters.

Today we have our Annual Meeting,

and as we review the year that is past

and think about the year to come,

I pray we will hold in our hearts, not only ourselves, here in this place,

but the neighbors Christ has given us,

here in Will and DuPage County, here in the United States,

and the neighbors we have throughout the world.

If we listen for what the Spirit is doing around us,

and I'm not saying I know what that is, because I don't,  
God will transform us.

Let's listen together this next year.

Let us hold our neighbors in our hearts.

Let us hold in prayer the gifts God has given us.

And let us remember the grace God gives us

to listen and discern and to have fun together as we do!

We will find Christ calling us in those things –

our neighbors, our gifts, and in the grace of our enjoyment of God  
and God's enjoyment of us.

I look at our neighbors in Rafah,

and I pray for safety and peace in Israel and of the Palestinians.

And I also pray for their transformation,

because that is the only way they will find a way out of their situation.

Jesus calls us all to transformation –

a transformation that brings us from death to life.

A transformation that opens our hearts to our neighbors,

opens our hearts even to ourselves,

and opens our hearts to God,

more deeply than we can dare to imagine.

Let us go there, together            Amen.