

## Commentary to the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Message: You and I can help gather people; we have a role in the Big Story.



With this homily I conclude a series about "The Big Story." We have seen that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the key that unlocks the significance of the universe and human history. And that we can enter that Story through baptism and participate even now in its final event - the Supper of the Lamb. In this homily we learn how Jesus gathers his people - and our role in that gathering.

To understand what today's Gospel says about gathering, we do need some background. Perhaps you remember the three main places of the Geography of Faith: Egypt, the Desert and the Promised Land. From the humiliation and slavery of Egypt, God brings us into the Desert of Decision and then to our true home, the Promised Land.

It is possible, however, to lose the Promised Land. That happens in 721 B.C. when Assyria overwhelms the Northern Kingdom and disperses the ten "lost tribes." We have a reference in the first reading: After the Exile, Gentiles (non-Jews) settle the Land of Zebulun and Naphtali. The few Jewish people who remain in the north - and those move their, like Joseph and Mary - find themselves in a

"land of gloom."

Jesus, as we see today, comes from the north - as a light into a place of darkness. He comes to reverse the Exile. He gathers the people - first the Jews, then the non-Jews.

How does Jesus gather people? Well, the first step in repentance. People lost the Promised Land because of sin: Instead of obeying God, they went after idols (false gods); they even sacrificed their little children to those idols. For that reason Jesus says, "repent." Change your minds, turn back to God. Fathers, turn to your children; children turn to your parents. Repent. That's the first step.

Then comes a second step. When Jesus sees Peter and Andrew, he looks them in the eye and says, "follow me." He needs help in gathering the people.

Most of you probably know that the name, Peter, means "rock." He is the rock on which Jesus builds his Church. But what about "Andrew"? Recently I talked to a man who said that when he was about twenty, he was questioning his identity. He took a long walk on Alki Beach, all the while asking what it means for him to be a man. When he got home, a letter awaited him. It was from a Christian girl and it contained a single sentence: "Your name is 'Andrew' which means 'man.'" He was amazed. He had not told the girl about his struggle - and he never used his middle name, "Andrew." That man later married and with his wife, has six children - some biological, some adopted. He serves as a medical doctor and witnesses to his faith in an open and loving way.

We need men like Andrew: husbands, fathers, hard-workers. We need people of all types - in all places - who hear Jesus say, "Follow me." And we should never forget that Andrew has a brother, Peter. The successor of Peter is Pope Francis. He has an Apostolic Exhortation called, "The Joy of the Gospel." In it he speaks about God's desire to save every person and his plan for "gathering up all things in Christ." Then Pope Francis expresses his dream that the Church would embrace a "missionary impulse." Instead of focusing on "self-preservation," he says, we need to call people to "friendship with Jesus."

I share Pope Francis' dream. I dream that we will give Jesus first place in our lives. That we will hear him say, "Follow me." And that we will do our part in gathering the people\*: Those who have become discouraged, those who have drifted from the faith. Families with small children, high school students and young adults. We have tough competition - a consumer society that promises fulfillment apart from God. Because of that false promise, many are falling into despair and misery. That's why we ask

people, Do you reject Satan? And all his works? And his empty promises?

You and I can gather people; we have a role in the Big Story. If we take time for prayer, if we repent and allow Jesus work through us, then (by his power) we can gather people. Jesus is the light for those living in darkness. Today he says, "Follow me." Amen.

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\*A man in my parish shared a story that underscores the need for us to become welcoming parishes that gather the lost. His adult son had invited his girl friend to attend Mass. They got as far as the parking lot when she froze. He tried his best, but she could not overcome her fear. It can be scary to enter a Catholic church. I dream that we will become welcoming parish that surround each person who enters with warmth and hospitality.

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