

Sermon at St. Thomas by Lynn E. Cunningham. Epiphany II, January 20, 2008. Isaiah 49:1-7 I Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-41.

1. This week in Dubois has been filled with events, some good, some tragic, some filled with strife and anger. Events in the life of the town, in the life of St. Thomas, and in my own personal life. Where is the work of the Holy Spirit in all that is going on?
2. So much has happened, and these lessons are so rich, that the parish might well spend a whole day in reflection on what the Holy Spirit might be leading the community to become, with these Epiphany lessons as the guides.
3. But to stay within the boundaries of this sermon time, I suggest a four word formula to help simplify things. The work of the Holy Spirit can never be reduced to a formula, but sometimes a short guide is helpful, like the creeds and the Lord's Prayer.
4. I will keep returning to these four points as a guide: prayer, listening, discovery, and action. Nothing even remotely original here. When events get confusing, hard to sort out, these four points orient you towards what God may be working out in the situation.
5. First, prayer, remembering to stop to give yourself a time, even a brief time, to go into prayer.
  - a. Second, listening, listening in prayer for what the Holy Spirit is offering in the time.
  - b. Third, discovery, allowing yourself to discover what the Holy One is doing in the events going on around you.
  - c. Fourth, action, acting on what the Holy One has revealed for you to discover in your listening.
  - d. So, again, prayer, listening, discovery, and action.
6. As I say, this has been quite a week in Dubois and for St. Thomas.
  - a. The school system is caught up in a controversy surrounding the renewal of the contract for the school administrator, Susan Kinneman.
  - b. The past two weeks saw the launching of an after school recreation program for junior high school-aged youth. Called Dubois Youth Activities, this program heavily involves our church, with opening sessions held in the community room, and a \$15,000 grant to the program from St. Thomas funds for youth work.
  - c. A local, young man, Dan Niedens, was killed in a horrendous auto wreck out by Stony Point last Saturday.
  - d. Our parish annual meeting is next Sunday, and all the ministries of this church will be reporting. We have good year end financial results for the parish as a whole and for the Opp Shop. There will be elections to the Vestry, and a discussion about a new strategy for Sunday morning Christian education.
  - e. The DVI building on the corner is well along in construction and the town as a whole is doing well.
7. Pray, listen, discover, take action.
8. These four points stand out in today's three Bible passages.
9. In the passage from today's Gospel, four of the disciples, including, Andrew and his brother, Simon Peter are called by Jesus. Now the casual reader might think, well, these four men are in the Bible, so of course they are going to decide to follow Jesus.
10. But think about it. They were living in small towns in the middle of a country that was in an unstable political situation. The Romans and the Jewish authorities were in a tense relationship over the future of the country. They had national political and economy, as does the U.S. And you can be sure that these four men were faced with local crises similar to ours. Troubles in the schools even or troubles out on the highway. Troubles in their homes. Andrew, Simon Peter, and the other two disciples, who are not named in this passage were almost certainly in various crises. Yet, they stopped, they prayed about those crises, they listened deeply to the words of John the Baptist and the words of Jesus, they discovered something new about God in their lives. Then they took action, by

- following Jesus.
11. Pray, listen, discover, take action. Those four did it. You and I can do it too.
  12. Paul's letter to the Corinthians. We know the story of Paul's life from the Book of Acts. His life had been in a crisis. He was a strict and devout Jew, but living under the Roman occupation of his country. He was outraged by the new upstart Christians who were subverting his faith, the faith of his ancestors. He hated those new Christians so much that he persecuted them.
  13. Actually, he did not just stop to pray. God stopped him, when he was traveling on the road to Damascus, with a bolt of flashing light. His unconscious body was taken to friends in Damascus who prayed over him. He listened to Jesus in that blinding flash of light. He discovered something very new about what God intended for his life. Jesus said in his vision, 'Paul stop persecuting me and my followers and come and follow me'. And then he took action, by working to spread the Gospel.
  14. All those four stages are reflected in this opening chapter from Corinthians. He says he was called to be an apostle. He glories in the way he and those in the churches call on the name of Jesus Christ. He says that they have been in every way enriched by Christ, in speech and in knowledge of every kind. A person does not come by this new knowledge except by stopping to pray, listening to the Holy One, discovering the new knowledge, and then acting on it. It is safe to say that this letter of Paul to the Corinthians plainly reflects this [iterative] process of going over these four steps again and again.
  15. Pray, listen, discover, take action. Paul and the circle around him did it. You and I can do it today.
  16. Is this little four stage process found in the passage from Isaiah? Yes! The first word of the passage is, "listen". "Listen to me, O coast lands. Pay attention you peoples far away." Over and over again the message of Isaiah and the other prophets is: listen to the word of God. Isaiah has listened to the Holy One, and discovered something new about himself, namely, that he, Isaiah, was called to be a prophet even before he was born.
  17. He discovered something completely fundamental about himself and his relation to the Holy One. Isn't that what real prayer and listening are often like? Real prayer is not just trying to talk God into doing something for you. Real prayer and listening can lead to discovering something radically new and challenging about yourself and about the world.
  18. Isaiah discovered not just something about himself, that he was called to be a prophet before he was born, but also something new about Judaism. He discovered that the core truth is not that God cares just about his Jewish children, but that God cares for all the peoples of the earth. That was a new and fearsome idea for Isaiah's own religious community.
  19. Praying and listening to the Holy One are going to lead to new and challenging things. The journey back to God, that I mentioned in my sermon two weeks ago, is not like graduating easily from one grade in school to the next. The journey is going to change a person in ways that that person you may not like. But they change by coming closer to God.
  20. Isaiah then took action. He did not simply pray and listen and then hide what he heard in the recesses of his own heart. He took action with his words. He flung them out for the whole nation to hear, for the whole world to hear. His words challenge us to this very day to look beyond our own borders and fences and limitations to reach out to the whole world in love and sharing and action.
  21. Yahweh challenges Isaiah with what must have been blood chilling words, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."
  22. Pray, listen, discover, take action. Isaiah did it. You and I can as well.

23. As you and I and our community go through the events I mentioned at the start, let each day reconnect you with the Holy One who loves you at the very core of your being.
24. On this journey back to the God who created, a habit to follow is to stop when events get confusing and harsh;
  - a. to stop and pray,
  - b. listen in your prayer for the action of the Holy Spirit, discover what the Holy Spirit may be about in these events,
  - c. and then take action.
  - d. Chances are that in taking action, you will get it wrong. We are all human. But then, God will always be there to lift you up and make your footing sure, as the Psalmist says today.
25. Pray, listen, discover, take action.
26. In Jesus name. Amen.