

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 9, 2025

Collaborative & Communal God

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“God extends an invitation, to the table of creation!” This offertory hymn has been resonating with me a lot lately. Its simple words and easy melody make it memorable. I appreciate the global twist in our music and liturgy during Epiphany, even if it sometimes gives me earworms!

In Scripture, we often see God inviting humanity to participate in divine action. Today's text from Isaiah recounts God's call to the prophet to go to the rebellious people of Israel and deliver God's word. The Psalmist speaks of God's steadfast love and presence, even “in the midst of trouble.” God not only invites but also walks alongside those invited, delivering and fulfilling them. In our Epistle reading, we hear how Paul, though least of the apostles, was invited into ministry and proclamation.

Beyond today's appointed readings, we see invitations extended to Moses, Gideon, Deborah, Eli, Hannah, Elijah and Elisha, King David, numerous other prophets, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, the other disciples, and many more! The story of Scripture, the story of God, is filled with God calling and inviting ordinary people into ministry, and into new ways of living, and abundant life.

This theme of invitation is not just a historical recount but a living reality. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus calls his first disciples, ordinary fishermen, to follow him and become “catchers of people.” This call to discipleship is an invitation to participate in the divine mission: to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and set the oppressed free. Jesus' choice of disciples from among common folk underscores God's preference for the humble and lowly, those often overlooked by society.

The Incarnation itself is the ultimate invitation. God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ invites all humanity to enter into relationship with the divine. Jesus' ministry was marked by his association with the marginalized and the outcast, demonstrating that God's invitation extends to everyone, regardless of social status or past mistakes.

In our own lives, God continually invites us to participate in this divine mission. We are called to step out of our comfort zones, leave behind our "nets and boats," and follow where Christ leads. This might mean engaging with people different from us, advocating for justice, or simply offering a listening ear to someone in need. The Way of Christ is a path of growth, love, and faith, requiring us to be open to new experiences and challenges.

This invitation becomes clearer as the church faces criticism for fulfilling its God-given call to serve the "least" of Christ's siblings. In the face of falsehoods and political propaganda, the church must also hear God's invitation to proclaim the truth. The truth that Lutheran Social Services does amazing work for the poor, the elderly, orphans, people with disabilities, refugees, immigrants, and many other vulnerable communities.

An attack on the church for doing the work of Christ is the very definition of anti-Christian. We cannot continue to allow false prophets and grifters to co-opt the name of Christ. We are called to leave our "boats and nets" and brave the new reality around us—a reality where feeding the hungry is made illegal and caring for those without shelter is considered weakness. Into this reality, Christ leads us to proclaim the Gospel, the GOOD NEWS. Good news to the poor, the hungry, the broken, the outcast, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.

As the work of Christ being done by the church is attacked we are called to throw ourselves more fervently into it. Lutheran Social Services will gladly welcome your support. Global Refuge will gladly welcome your voices in advocacy. Here in Williamsburg we need your help with Community of Faith Mission this upcoming week. FISH and GWOM and so many other faithful and faith filled groups need you, need us. Vulnerable communities need us now too!

Stand in solidarity with refugees and asylum seekers. Do not tolerate hatred towards your LGBTQIA+ siblings. Get to know your neighbors. Build community. Hear what's on your neighbors' hearts and minds. Reassure them, care for them, love them. Invite them to grow towards greater love and grace, healthier lives, and deeper community.

This is the invitation to discipleship. Think about what these fishermen will go on to do in the months and years ahead of them. They stepped out into a world of Roman power, Chief priests and pharisees. They followed Jesus and witnessed storms calmed and multitudes fed. They witness to the cross and resurrection and out of that they build a new community. From these experiences, all stemming from that first invitation, they went on to build a new community; centered around the love and grace they learned from Christ, proclaiming it as the Way we are all called to live. We are invited in countless ways to follow the Way, the Way of life, the Way of Christ.

As we reflect on these invitations, let us remember that we are not alone. God walks alongside us, just as God walked with Isaiah, Paul, and the first disciples. We are part of a larger community of believers, all striving to live out the call to love and serve. Together, we can create a world that reflects the kingdom of God, a place where everyone is valued and included.

Knowing that God is with us and that we have the promise of eternal life in God, we can joyfully accept God's invitation to collaboration with open hearts and minds. Let us be willing to go where we are called, to serve those in need, and to share the good news of God's love with all. In doing so, we participate in the ongoing story of God's work in the world, a story that is filled with hope, grace, and abundant life. Amen.