

Sermon for Sunday, July 3, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.”

So begins our gospel this week.
Jesus is still on the move,
still heading down towards Jerusalem,
still trailing the twelve apostles,
and apparently a large crowd of others,
all wanting to follow him.

And as he goes,
he calls the crowds to him,
and divides them into pairs,
and sends them out ahead of him.
Go into the towns and villages
where I will come,
and heal people, and tells them
that the Kingdom of God has come near.

And off they go, and they come back with amazement:
“It worked!”

And the classic way
to preach on this text
is to talk about the way that Jesus is calling us to go out
ideally in pairs,
to go out to tell people
 in word and action
that the kingdom of God is here.

But what if, what if
we look at the text
from a different perspective?
What if
we are not so much like
the disciples

as the people they were sent to?

One of the things we often forget
when we read the bible
is why each part of it
was written.

Some parts
like the psalms
are a kind of prayerbook
for the faithful.

Others, like the epistles,
are letters to newborn churches.

And others, like the gospel of Luke
are written to individuals
so that they might deepen
their faith.

Remember how Luke begins his gospel?

“Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

Luke is writing his gospel
to tell his friend Theophilus
the essentials of what Jesus said and did
so that
so that Theophilus might more strongly believe
what he has been taught.

This gospel
is not so much written for insiders,
those who met Jesus, jumped out of their boats,
and followed him;
nor are they particularly for outsiders,
those who have never heard of Jesus,
through they are a wonderful witness to his story.
But it seems that this gospel is written for the ones
who are somewhere in the middle.
It's inviting us

to take the next step, deeper
into our faith.

And if you look at this text
from that perspective
maybe it's not just the disciples
that we can identify with.
Maybe it's the people in the villages and towns
that they visit.

Imagine
that you are living
in a small village.
Life is going on as usual.
You work hard
and make an adequate living.
All your family live nearby
so that most of the time you're not working,
you're either home or visiting one of them,
apart from the time
when you're fulfilling your religious obligations.
Occasionally you travel further afield,
sometimes
to buy things that aren't available in your own village,
sometimes
to visit family;
once you made a pilgrimage to the city
and the temple.
But mostly
life goes on as usual.

Then one day
two strangers come into town.
You've never seen them before.
They speak with an accent,
from up north;
they're covered in dust
and seem to have brought nothing with them.
And then they start to speak.
"The kingdom of God has come near."

What would you do?
Would you welcome them
with open arms,
make them a special meal,
invite them to stay with you?
And ask them
to tell you more?

Or would you keep your distance,
preferring to leave the responsibility of hospitality
to someone else,
or even better,
let them go on their way?
After all, you know your scriptures.
Your religion is fine.
And you like things
just as they are.

What would you do
if the messengers of the kingdom of God
showed up
unannounced?

The seventy disciples
went out two by two,
and some places welcomed them,
and some didn't.
They preached, and they healed,
and they had amazing experiences
of the power
of God.

The places they visited
who welcomed them
were just as amazed.
Strangers had come, and had preached to them
and healed them,
and had promised
that Jesus was on his way.

But the places they came
 who didn't welcome them,
well, nothing happened.
They went on with their lives
as they had always been.
Jesus didn't visit.
They had no clue
of how close they had come
to God,
and how
they had missed it.

So what if, what if,
the kingdom of God
is near us?
What if
God is sending us messengers
announcing Christ?
Are we ready to receive
and welcome them?

In the letter to the Hebrews, it says,
"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained
angels without knowing it."

Are angels, messengers of God, showing up here in St James?
And if so, how are we responding?

You see,
sometimes
God shows up
in the most unexpected way.
God shows up,
and it's our call
whether we welcome him or not.

Of course, we'd like to think
that we would.
We'd like to think

that we would immediately recognize him
or his messengers
and welcome them.

But the reality is
that there are lots of things
that can get in our way.

Perhaps
we're just too busy.
We can't imagine
fitting anything else into our lives.
Even though
it might make them
infinitely better.

Perhaps
we just like our lives
as they are.
We're content, more or less.
We don't want anything
to rock the boat.
We don't want anything
to change.

Or perhaps we don't like our lives as they are
but we figure
that what we know
is better than what we don't.
We don't like uncertainty.
We'd prefer to stick with what we know.

Perhaps it's that we're still dreaming
of how things used to be. We imagine
if we could just go back to what it used to be like,
everything
would be wonderful.

All of those things
can result in us

missing out
on God
coming to work among us.

There's a hymn I once came across
which sadly
hadn't been set to music,
that began
"If you're sitting on the fence
or looking in the wrong direction..."

Sometimes,
that's us.

And I wonder,
what are the things of God that we say no to, without even realizing it?

But there is an alternative.
There is an alternative.
And it's to choose to stay open
to the possibility
that the kingdom of God may indeed be near.
That every person
that walks through these doors
might be a messenger of the Christ.
That God might indeed
have new and wonderful things
to do among us.

Yes, there's a risk.
There's always a risk. We can't know for sure
whether someone is a messenger of Christ,
a herald of the kingdom
or a fraud.
But we have to take that risk,
we have to,
or we risk something much worse.
We miss being passed by
by the kingdom
of God,

the imaginative, creative
power of Christ.

If the kingdom of God comes near to St James,
if Jesus is wanting to come into this village of ours
with good news,
will you welcome him?