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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA  
Sunday, January 24, 2021  
3 Epiphany, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary  
[Jonah 3:1-5, 10](#)  
[Psalm 62:6-14](#)  
[1 Corinthians 7:29-31](#)  
[Mark 1:14-20](#)

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They call it “phishing.” Not spelled with an “f” but with a “ph.”

You’ve certainly been a target; so have I, so has everyone with an email account or a cell phone. It’s when someone tries to fool you into giving them your personal information or sending them money by posing as a trusted source. You get an email that looks like it’s from your bank with a real-looking link saying “Click here to verify your credentials.” Or an email that looks like it’s from someone you know saying “I need a favor, can you mail me some Safeway gift cards right away?” Phishers have targeted our parish members before with emails that look like they’re coming from me, or from Bishop Megan. It’s just one of the occupational hazards of using the internet. And it’s no wonder they call it phishing. The scammers are dangling bait in front of us and trying to reel us in.

Jesus tells Peter and Andrew that they will go from being fishers of fish, to being fishers of people. He’s not talking about scamming people or manipulating them. He’s talking about sharing good news—that’s the word he uses twice in this passage, *evangelion*, “good news.” He’s talking about an invitation to follow him, the same invitation he makes to Peter and Andrew, an invitation they in turn will share with others, inviting them to come and see.

But to a lot of our friends and neighbors, that invitation can feel more like “phishing” with a “ph.” Evangelism doesn’t have a great reputation. Nor does

Christianity. Over and over, surveys and studies show that people in our society identify less and less with a religious tradition. And they associate Christianity more and more with some specific traits: narrow-minded. Exclusive. Anti-science; anti-evolution; anti-climate change. Anti-immigrants. Homophobic.

Those traits don't reflect the way of being Christian I know. And they certainly don't reflect the Jesus I know, the Jesus who is so compelling that people drop everything to follow him. But they do reflect the image of Christianity in our society, especially in places like California where conventional religiosity isn't deeply embedded in the culture. Right now that image is even worse as the symbols of Christian faith are adopted by Christian nationalists to promote white supremacy and authoritarianism. We saw those symbols on full display in the invasion of the Capitol Building, with rioters holding crosses and signs reading "Jesus 2020" and "Make America Godly Again."

It's not easy to invite people to take a look at Jesus in this climate. Sometimes, in fact, we might choose not to. A few years back I read an essay by Emily Scott, a Lutheran pastor who started a quirky little church community in Brooklyn called St. Lydia's centered around a shared supper: "dinner church," she called it. The essay was about how she related to her friends and neighbors, mostly young adults in Brooklyn, many of them gay, lesbian, or transgender, many of them with experiences of being hurt and rejected by Christians. "We hang out. We have coffee. We talk about each other's lives," she said. "And I don't invite them to church. They know I'm a pastor. Sometimes they ask about it. And I don't invite them to church. I tell them about the challenges of writing sermons or what's driving me crazy about my congregation. And I don't invite them to church."<sup>1</sup> For Emily the practice of not inviting was an intentional practice. She knew her friends had had enough experience already of pushy Christians trying to convert them. What they hadn't experienced was a person of faith living life in a real relationship with them without an agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> I haven't been able to find this article; I think it appeared in Episcopal Café five or ten years ago.

Now Emily Scott was in a specific situation. I think there are times when we really should invite friends to church, probably more often than most Episcopalians in general are comfortable doing. And it's important that in choosing not to invite her friends to church, she wasn't doing it out of shyness or embarrassment. She wasn't hiding her identity as a pastor or a person of faith. She was introducing them to Jesus, not through a sales pitch, but through herself. And that's what we're called to do as well.

If we as Christians remain silent about our faith, we are allowing others to define our faith for us. If we believe the Jesus of scripture is about compassion rather than cruelty, truth-telling rather than conspiracy theories and lies, welcoming strangers rather than excluding them, abundance for all rather than special treatment for the wealthy or white, respecting the humanity even of our adversaries rather than name-calling and humiliating them—we need to say so.

I had a conversation earlier this week with an acquaintance who told me about the pain she feels about her relationship with her brother. He's deeply invested in a fundamentalist form of Christianity and the last few years have seen their religious differences grow into an enormous political divide. I told her how sorry I was. I shared some similar experiences from my own circle of family and friends. I said how hard it is for me to understand a form of Christianity that glorifies power or cruelty and that the God I know is a God of love. It was a pretty short and basic comment and I was surprised at how strong her reaction was. "Thank you," she said. "Even though I'm not part of that spiritual tradition it feels really good to hear you say that, to know there are Christians who see things differently."

"The time is here, and the reign of God has come near. Turn your heart around," says Jesus, "and believe in the good news." Now following Jesus isn't necessarily easy even though it's good news. It involves taking up a cross. Jesus is pretty clear about that. It involves following someone who left home and family, preached a message that wasn't often understood, whose own friends left him when he was arrested, and who was crucified by those in authority. And in all that, it's the path of real life: life in communion with God and God's people, life in and through and

on the other side of suffering and death. Resurrection life. That's something incredible to share.

Evangelism is hard in our place and time because Christianity is associated with domination and exclusion. We're called to do it nonetheless. Not as a scam, but as a gift. Not as a bait-and-switch, but as an invitation: an invitation to meet Jesus, the real Jesus, the one who will lead us on the path of the cross that is also the path of life.