

Epiphany 3 (B) – January 22, 2012
Saint Stephen’s Church, Wimberley, TX
Patrick Gahan
Mark 1:14-20
We Can Be Changed...through Leaving!

William would get up and leave his seat. Even though he was just a ten year-old kid, leaving was all part of his plan. You see William grew up in Miami in the early 1950’s. Forget visions of *Miami Vice*, palm trees, and exotic locales. No, this was the Miami that looked a lot like the Deep South, where the races were carefully and rabidly separated. Seeing this, William soon understood that not everything could be left to adults.

He learned this first hand on a Thursday. At age ten, he was old enough to join his older brother in the church’s Children’s Choir. So after school on Thursday afternoons, he would hop on the growling, smoking city bus with his big brother, and they would ride into the city. Rehearsal ended about 5:30, and they would hop back on the diesel bus with its fierce engine snarl and the thick, sooty smoke. But then William noticed something. There were men and even women standing, although there were a good many seats unoccupied. “Why don’t they sit,” William asked their brother? “They’re colored folks,” his brother indignantly whispered back. “Colored people have to stay in the back of the bus.”

William took all this in, and next Thursday he worked his plan. When he and his brother climbed up the steps of the hulking, smoking bus, William immediately left his brother at their customary front seat and headed to the back and sat down. After three or four stops, all the seats at the rear of the bus were filled with black female maids and male day laborers. William immediately left his seat and offered it to a particularly worn out maid. Just the look of gratitude on her face let William know his plan had worked. On the scores of bus rides he made after that time, he repeated his plan. No amount of harassment or threats – even from burly bus drivers – could deter him. He kept leaving his seat and offering it to another.

The pastor who tells this story is a longtime friend of William. She reflects that William must have been paying attention, not only at choir practice, but also at Sunday School.¹ So he knew from the procession of Bible stores he was taught that what he witnessed on those Thursday afternoon bus rides was evil. William must have known the story we read today, where Simon and Andrew and James and John are called by Jesus and immediately left their nets, their boats, their families, their homes, and even their way of life to follow in the steps of their new Lord.

If a young boy from 1950’s Miami could be challenged by this story, so can we. **First** of all, notice that when John is arrested, Jesus begins to take up the mantle of his cousin’s preaching. Jesus roars like John, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;

¹ Cynthia Weems, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century*, January 11, 2012, p. 21. *My account is based on the Rev. Weem’s story, though amplified.*

repent and believe in the good news” (**Mark 1:15**). The Greek verbs used for “fulfilled” and come near” are in the present tense, which means they represent actions begun in the past and carried on into the future. Jesus, in other words, did not invent the kingdom, nor is he the first to herald it. His message proceeds from the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Zechariah hundreds of years before him, but Jesus has listened to the scriptures in the synagogue at Nazareth and to the Spirit, and he knows now is the time.

That’s what happened to William, as well. No one had to point out to him that the segregation on that city bus was evil. He learned that in the Holy Scriptures at Sunday School and in Vacation Bible School. In the same way, we Christians are the recipients of that same great story originating in the great sagas of the Old Testament and continuing in Jesus, Paul, John, and the other apostles. The question is whether we will actively remember them or merely catalogue them in our heads like stale nursery rhymes. The Good News must show up in our lives.

Second, those first four disciples did not hesitate when Jesus calls them. The Gospel story records that upon seeing Simon, Andrew, James, and John, Jesus “immediately” called them, and the four “immediately” responded (**Mark 1:18, 20**). The disciples cannot put off refashioning their lives to emulate their new master Jesus. True, they leave the security of what they have been doing – fishing, family life, and village life, but they also leave the security of how they have long viewed their world. Jesus will have them leave behind any notion that the oppressive power structures operating around them and those equally oppressive ones operating in their hearts can be allowed to remain unchallenged.

William, even as a ten year-old boy, understood the power of this story. Every time he boarded one of those smoking, growling buses, sat in the back, and then immediately left his seat to give to a harassed African-American maid or laborer, he personally challenged the despotic power structures of his day, and, at the same time, challenged the darkness of his own heart. Christ leaves no stone unturned within us. That’s why we call it *conversion*!

Once we come to Christ, he strengthens us to leave our old idols behind. Take another young person named “William.” In 1965, he left the comfort of his home in Minnesota to board a bus bound for Selma, AL. He wanted to march with Dr. King. However, young William was not prepared for the welcome he received. No sooner did this 6’7” Nordic youth exit the bus than a stern, no-nonsense black man demanded that he immediately leave his bags and make his way down to a nearby white frame church. There he and others were taught how to take a blow from the police and not fight back. If they could not leave retribution behind, they would not be allowed to march with Martin Luther King. Young “William” agreed, yet he was immediately arrested anyway for just holding hands with an African-American girl while walking on the city sidewalk.

This young “William” is our own William “Bill” Scheel, our own Bible teacher. He learned from the Holy Scriptures that Christians can never just leave well enough alone!