Sermon for Epiphany 3, Yr. A

Matthew 4: 12-23--January 26, 2020

Once upon a time, 183 years ago almost to the day in fact, the territory of Michigan became the state of Michigan. In 1838, the year following Michigan’s statehood, Andrew McArthur settled in this new state near the shores of a pristine lake that was home to many otters. This was the humble beginning of our little village. It wasn’t until February 12, 1873, that the Otter Lake post office opened. In 1874, Page & Benson Pine Lumber Company platted the community, and that same year the Pere Marquette Railroad came through the area. Lumber from the surrounding land and ice from the frozen lake in the winter provided local income. The Village of Otter Lake was incorporated in 1883. It was a boom town with hotels, railroads, and large stately homes.

With the little village growing not only economically but also in population, the residents recognized the need for spiritual support. It was in the living room of one of those stately homes that plans were made to construct a church for the residents of the town. Local legend says that at the time members of the United Presbyterian Church, the Baptist Church and the Episcopal Church were residents of the town, and all were eager for a place to worship. However, funds to construct three buildings were beyond their means. So, a town meeting was held at the home of Mr. C. W. Cumings. It was decided that they should seek formal affiliation with the denomination having the greatest number of representatives at the meeting. The Episcopalians were in the majority by only one vote, with the Baptists coming in second. An Episcopal mission was established, but out of consideration for the many voting Baptists, our church was named St. John the Baptist. Perhaps this was the first miracle in our village.

The foundation was laid and the cornerstone proudly displaying the year 1885 was set. St. John’s was constructed with local lumber and the mighty beams in the ceiling were hand hewn and hoisted in place by members of the congregation. The bricks used in the outer walls were made in the kilns down by the lake. In September of 1885, after a summer of feverish activity, the building was dedicated and the first service held*.*

Our church record books indicate that over the next century many baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and, of course, funerals were held within the confines of this worship space. These services were presided over by many-a-priest who came to Otter Lake to care for the flock of Episcopalians who on that fateful day when the vote was taken had one more believer in attendance than the other denominations.

The village grew and other denominations were eventually able to build churches, too, including the Methodists, Nazarenes, and Seventh Day Adventists. The 1880 census listed the population of Otter Lake as 306. In 1960 the population reached its highest of 562, and it has been moving downward ever since. In 2010, the population was 389. Who knows what lies ahead for the 2020 census?

As always in our lives, circumstances change. The Methodist Church closed, the Nazarenes moved out to the west side of town, and the Adventists have a dwindling congregation. The congregation at St. John’s in the 1990s wasn’t doing very well either. After our priest passed away, the congregation attempted to keep the red doors welcoming and open. A priest was called but that was not successful. We were yoked, as it was called, with a cluster of churches in the thumb and shared a priest, but that, too, did not work. A few faithful members made every attempt to hold the church together, but they grew weary. Nothing seemed to work. **Another miracle,** like the one that brought us into being, was needed…but could there be one?

As part of the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Diocese of Eastern Michigan, stories are being collected and told that are designed to highlight the journey we, as a diocese, as parishes, and as individuals, have taken to become who and what we are. With Janet’s help, we are going to see a snippet of a longer storytelling video between our first bishop, Ed Leidel, and our second bishop, Todd Ousley.

Video

It was just a question, one bishop asking another, “Have you ever witnessed a miracle?”

I watched the clip many times before it sank in---St. John’s is a miracle. WE are a miracle. This miracle could not have happened had it not been for a congregation willing to believe in miracles. As in our gospel today when Jesus called to Peter and Andrew and said, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” **we** heeded the call to believe in the power of something new and different. **WE** were willing to take a chance on re-creating St. John’s from a plan that, quite frankly, didn’t really exist. **We** were willing to believe in ourselves! Just as those disciples were called by Jesus, we, too, were called. I imagine they were scared. What could they expect? The same was true for St. John’s, what would happen? And the best part of it is that **All** of **US** are responsible for our success! **We** are a team!

Our founding fathers had no idea when they chose the name for this church, wanting to be inclusive, that it would be more than appropriate 135 years later. **WE** continue the work that St. John the Baptist began over 2000 years ago when he baptized Jesus. We accept our baptismal covenant with our whole heart, mind, spirit and body when we say that **with God’s help** we will proclaim His word and seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves!

And **we** look to the future, **TOGETHER,** so that this miracle, an amazing act of God, a marvel far greater than anyone, including bishops, ever expected, will be here for generations to come, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being.