

I had made it through the morning of my first day of high school relatively unscathed. Sure, I was still nervous, but by lunch time I had successfully found my locker, made it to homeroom and the classrooms of my first three classes. Fourteen years old (barely) and a freshman in a big new high school.

As usual, the pronunciation of my last name had confounded each teacher encountered thus far. But the usual nursery rhyme strategy seemed to work- "it's pronounced like 'bye, baby bunting, daddy's gone a hunting'- just ignore the E."

But now it was lunch time and the dreaded, dreadful cafeteria full of unknown teenagers loomed. I got into the lunch line with my plastic tray and proceeded. So far, so good. When I arrived at the end of the line to pay, the "lunch lady" at the cash register looked at me before ringing up my lunch and asked, "Are you a new teacher?"

Not what I had expected. At ALL.

Beginnings can be so awkward. And surprising.

Today's Gospel reading keeps us focused on the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. We are in a relative backwater area- Galilee. In the worldview of Jesus' day, holiness and ritual purity existed in concentration at the Temple in Jerusalem. As one moved further away from the Temple, with its Holy of Holies, one moved further and further away from holiness and purity. How surprising to find the Holy One of God so very far from the Temple. How surprising that the Holy One of God comes near and begins teaching and healing in such a backwater! Jesus' ministry begins by overturning the usual notions of where God may be found, especially geographically-based notions of where God is.

Jesus has only just, verses ago, called his initial little band of disciples from the countryside to come and follow him. Simon, Andrew, James and John, just four fishermen, find themselves with this teacher and healer. Simon's household experiences one of the first healings, when Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. She got up from her sickbed and began to serve them. And people of the town descend on Simon's house, bringing their sick and those afflicted by demons to Jesus for healing. That had to be surprising to these four newbie disciples. And the healings were certainly pleasant, amazing and welcome surprises for those made whole and those who brought them to Jesus.

Then in the wee hours of the night, they discover that Jesus is missing. And they hunt for him- one translator of the original Greek says they "stalked" him and find him out in a solitary place in the desert, absorbed in prayer.

And Jesus' response- when informed that everyone is looking for him- is to push on to the next village, in order to "proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

Today is a beginning for St Paul and the Redeemer and for me, as I start my time as Interim Rector with you. I am slightly more familiar with SPR than I was with my new high school on the first day. Some of you I remember from my time as a parishioner here, before this very parish walked with me through discernment and supported me for ordination. I headed off for my seminary field education experiences in 2008, so I have been away for just shy of 10 years.

The strangeness for me of this beginning is the mix of the familiar and the new. People and faces that have come to this parish who I do not know. The familiarity of the building, even as it has changed and is changing even now

with construction continuing. Even those of you who know me from my time here did not know me as a priest, only as an aspirant and postulant. I assure you, there are apt to be surprises to come.

Today's Gospel also points us toward several constants that are helpful to highlight at the outset of a time of interim ministry. These will be touchstones for our ministry together as we embark on the adventure of self-assessment, search and discernment toward SPR calling the its next rector.

What are these constants?

First, as Simon's mother-in-law demonstrates as soon as she is healed, our continued priority and focus is to serve Jesus and others. The report in the Gospel that she got up and served them may serve as an indication that she really was healed and feeling better, but it is also a reminder to us that following Jesus is about serving. Serving Jesus is manifest in others, the neglected and those in need, those broken by suffering and longing for healing, those looking for hope and justice and peace. Clergy change, but that mission of service to neighbor remains constant.

Second, the critical foundation for all our ministry together and for this community's process toward calling a new rector is exemplified by Jesus when he goes to a deserted spot to pray. Simon and John and Andrew and James clearly were new to this idea as they hunted for the Jesus in the predawn hours. Individual and corporate prayer are the wellspring for the wisdom, energy, courage, humility and trust in God that times of clergy transition require. The Spirit is alive and moving here, and our ongoing prayer for one another and for our ministries together will keep us connected to the wellsprings of the Spirit guiding us to the future God dreams for SPR.

Lastly, this Gospel reminds us to keep going in sharing the message of Christ. After healing Simon's mother-in-law and then all those folks from the area, Jesus is not interested in resting on what he has done. Rather, he is clear about his mission, and he articulates it to his little band of disciples, to proclaim Good News. While we go through the important introspection and reflection that are part of this transition process, we also are called to continue to proclaim to the world the Good News that the Holy One of God, the light of the world, has come among us in Christ.

So, as we begin together, may we share in the hope that God is doing this new thing here at SPR, guiding our shared ministry and witness to Christ, and join me in praying, deeply and daily, for the Spirit to guide and inspire us in months ahead.

And expect surprises.