

### Our Reason to Rejoice

Imagine an early morning, the start of a blisteringly hot, sunny day, just like the countless days before. You wake up and roll over, stiff from another night of sleeping on the ground. You don't mind, though. After weeks of tramping along dusty roads, eating whatever is put in front of you and camping out, you're accustomed to living rough. The only question in your mind is, "will he stop and speak to us today?"

When the Nazarene rabbi and his friends arrived in your little village, you didn't even notice them at first. You were too busy scraping a living out of a meager scrap of desert land, begging Adonai to let you raise enough food to pay your punishing taxes and still have something left over to eat. There were sheep to tend, crops to sow, grain and grapes to harvest. Perhaps the land you farmed was your own but, more likely, you worked as a serf on a farm that belonged to someone else. Then, somebody told you that the rabbi everybody had been gossiping about had come to town, and he was in the marketplace healing anybody who came to him. You thought of your aching shoulder, arthritic knee or constant back pain, and decided that you might as well head into town to see what all the fuss was about.

When you got to the market, the crowds jostling around the rabbi were so thick that you couldn't even see him. Then, one of his students - you now know him as Thomas - took you by the arm and led you to a long line of your waiting neighbors. Inching forward, you caught glimpses of the rabbi doing impossible things, healing people who had suffered for years, making the blind see, the lame walk, the town beggar dance away rejoicing. Suddenly, it was your turn. The rabbi turned, and you found yourself staring into the most extraordinary eyes you had ever seen, eyes that seemed to look down to the very bottom of your heart, seeing your every fear and flaw and loving you anyway, without the slightest reservation or hint of judgment. Then,

he touched you, and every pain, every burden, every heartache and secret shame you had carried from childhood vanished in an instant. You left the farm and have been following him ever since.

You're not the only person to leave a former life behind to follow him. There are scores of others just like you who trail along in his wake, peasants and day laborers, tax collectors, former lepers, and a surprising number of women, some of whom once made their living in ways that could have gotten them stoned to death. There are a few merchants, a handful of Gentiles, even a couple of priests and lawyers, though not many. Rich, powerful people sometimes come to hear the Nazarene speak, but they don't often linger. None of you belong to his inner circle, the twelve students whom he called first and who now carry an air of celebrity because everyone knows that they're his favorites. You aren't jealous. You're content just to follow, waiting for those glorious moments when he stops and addresses the crowd. So, when Thomas calls you by name and says, "Come with me, Jesus wants to see you," you're shocked, thrilled and a little worried that you might have done something to make him send you away. When you discover that Jesus has chosen you — yes, you! — for a special mission, you're so proud and excited that you barely hear him say that he's sending you out without provisions to travel to towns that may take you in or drive you away, and to testify to the coming of Adonai's Kingdom, a message that some of your listeners will receive with delight and others will angrily reject. Jesus has a job for you, and that's the only thing that matters.

I tell this story in hope of capturing the excitement that must have gripped those seventy followers whom Jesus chose to spread the good news of the Kingdom's coming. Those people weren't Jesus's twelve disciples, who had already gone out in pairs and come back triumphant. Perhaps their excursion had been a trial run, or perhaps Jesus decided that he needed more voices to get his message out. Having set his face toward Jerusalem, Jesus knew that time was running

short. The seventy messengers whom he sent before him could announce his coming more quickly and broadly than he and the disciples could alone, unless he used supernatural means that might have elicited more terror than joy from the villagers whom they encountered.

Jesus didn't make it easy for them. Take next to nothing with you, he told them. Stay wherever you're invited, eat whatever you're given, and preach the Kingdom to everyone, even those who reject or oppose you. And there would be rejection and opposition – Jesus told the seventy that he was sending them out “like lambs into the midst of wolves” for good reason. The Temple authorities were already forming up to oppose him, some in the communities they would visit were indifferent or even hostile to his message, and the Romans were a constant threat to anyone who encountered them. Jesus gave the seventy an uncertain, potentially dangerous task – but it was also a real, live mission from God.

Jesus's instructions to the seventy are so different from the way we post-moderns travel. Once we've passed the age for backpacking and hostels, the idea of traveling without knowing exactly where we're going or what will happen while we're on the road lacks appeal. Instead, we plan ahead. We consult websites, make reservations, and purchase tickets well in advance. We know what modes of transportation we'll use, where we'll stay every night, what we'll see and do while we're away, and when we'll return home. We overpack against every contingency, and can be infuriated by even minor delays, cancellations, or other inconveniences. If Jesus invited us to go out on his behalf with these same instructions, I wonder how many of us would accept.

I can't help noticing, though, how much we have in common with those seventy followers who answered Jesus's call. Like them, twenty-first century Episcopalians come from all walks of life. We follow Jesus and participate in church life, but we may not always be able to say why. We try to be decent people, but few of us claim to be as saintly as the apostles. And if

Jesus himself suddenly showed up and tapped us for a mission, I suspect that most of us would be at least as shocked and terrified as we would be honored to take up the task. Nonetheless, we are among the heirs to the seventy, and I believe that means that we, too, are charged by Jesus with going out into the world and letting people know that the Kingdom has come near.

Episcopalians tend to be reluctant evangelists, so you may be glad to hear that I don't think Jesus expects most of us to make grand, public speeches about him. Full disclosure, though: I'm biased. The louder people shout about Jesus, the less trustworthy they usually seem to me. In my opinion, we most effectively tell those around us that the Kingdom has come near when we behave as if we believe it has. Jesus has told us what life in the Kingdom should look like. When we love God with all our hearts, love one another as Jesus loves us and act on our love, everyone who sees us learns that the Kingdom has come closer, thanks to the Lord who inspires us to live by his teachings as we follow him.

Over the next few weeks, we'll explore in greater depth what Jesus means when he talks about the coming of the Kingdom. It's not an entirely simple concept, and it can be challenging to apply it in our lives. In the meanwhile, however, there is no end of opportunities in this world to live out what we profess in our faith. When we seek to show our neighbors what Jesus means by the Kingdom drawing near, we may not find, as the seventy did, that literal demons flee before us (though the demons of anger, cruelty, envy, selfishness, and prejudice just might). But as Jesus reminds us, carrying his message isn't about rejoicing in the exercise of power, even when we do it in the most noble of causes. It's about answering Jesus's call to love and care for one another as a gift to the God we love. When we do, we may someday find, as the seventy did, that our names are written in heaven. Jesus has a mission for us. And that is truly the best possible reason to rejoice. Amen.