



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Into the Regions Beyond
The Third Sunday after Epiphany
Sunday, January 26, 2020
The Rev. Paul McLain

'The land beyond the Jordan'
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

So, why did Peter drop his net and follow Jesus? Just the act of dropping his net was a monumental thing. That net was his livelihood. It was his treasure, his life's work. He had spent his daytime hours learning how best to use it to catch fish. He spent his nighttime hours mending it, restringing it, strand by strand, calibrating it to do an even better job in the waters the next morning.

For any of us, his action would be comparable to walking away from the job that we've known for years. Not only walking away, but leaving behind everything we've built up during our time in that job. He not only left behind his security, he left behind what he had always believed would be his legacy. Why would he do this? Perhaps it was because Jesus was such a charismatic figure, he could not say no to him. But I wonder if it was that, for the first time in his life, Peter was given a choice – a choice to do something different, a choice to follow and perhaps to help create a different way, a choice to go on an adventure that could change him and even change the world. Jesus gave Peter his first and only chance to go into the regions beyond.

Most colleges and seminaries have a motto, usually three to four words, that aspires to capture the essence of the school's identity and mission. My seminary was no different and its motto is: "Into the regions beyond." Each time I reflect on that motto, one person invariably comes to mind - Lottie Moon. Any of you who grew up Southern Baptist will remember that name. As children, we would put our pennies and spare change in little blue mite boxes throughout the year, so that in December, we could bring them in and proudly present them as part of the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions.

Lottie Moon was the closest thing we had to a saint in the Southern Baptist church. She was revered for giving up her comfortable life to become a missionary to China. She was a young single woman in the 1800's who wanted to make service to God her life's work. The choices available to women for such a life were extremely limited. Her expected path was marriage. She wrote two articles for *The Religious Herald* in which she argued that Southern Baptist women should be allowed to do paid religious work.

Lottie learned that the Southern Baptist Church was looking for a single woman to serve as a missionary to China. She applied and was accepted. While she did feel a genuine sense of call to China, part of the reason she went was that it was the only option available to her to become a paid religious professional. Like Peter's fateful encounter with Jesus on the lakeshore, it was the only choice she had. And, like it did for him, it was a choice that would take her "into the regions beyond."

Notice that Matthew introduces Jesus's call of Peter and the first disciples with our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah today: "In the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." Through this framing, we see the call of these fisherman through the lens of God's vision, which is a global one.

Peter was about to embark on an adventure that would take him from being a local fisherman to becoming a global missionary, often a reluctant one. His movement into the regions beyond would not just be a geographic journey, but a psychological and spiritual one as well. Peter had to overcome his adherence to Jewish purity laws in order to baptize a Roman centurion named Cornelius. He had to learn how to be humble enough to change his mind and his heart. He had to yield to a new way of being, even to a new way of loving those he once thought of as unclean heathens.

Lottie Moon went deep inland to the rural places where the men didn't want to go. She lived alone as a single female in a remote village in a foreign land. She was the only one available or willing to speak or preach to groups eager to learn about the Christian faith. When she was criticized for doing men's work in preaching, she wrote, "Well then, send me a man and I'll stop." Lottie Moon experienced a conversion much like Peter's. She moved from seeing the Chinese people as heathens to seeing them as beloved children of God. She began to see herself as a fellow native on a shared journey of mutual love.

Epiphany is the season of light, when we celebrate that the initial spark of light from the Christ child matures to do nothing less than light up the whole world. And today is our annual meeting, a time when we celebrate the ways over the last year that we have joined Christ in shining a lot of light into the life of our parish, our city, and our world. It is also a time to reflect on this new year and pray about and discern the hidden places where we can cast a wider net or light a new candle.

We can look to the examples of Saint Peter and Lottie Moon, who did much to shine the light of Christ into the forgotten corners of the world. But they also had the humility and courage to invite Jesus in to illuminate the hidden corners within their own souls. May we have the courage this year to join Jesus and them in being vulnerable in the regions within, and then embark on a new adventure as we go out together and shine his light into the regions beyond. *Amen.*