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Bangor, Maine
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CALLED TOGETHER

Isaiah 9:1-4

Matthew 4:12-23

The second half of today's gospel lesson speaks about Jesus calling the first disciples. At the heart of this passage, we read that Jesus invites two sets of brothers--four fishermen-- with these words: "follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And then Matthew tells us that "immediately they left their nets and followed him."

The calling of the twelve, an amazing event of first century Palestine, has something of a parallel in the nineteenth century with the audacious calling of riders for the pony express in our own country. Three men had a vision about creating an express mail service: William H. Russell, Alexander Majors and William B. Waddell. As a way to tie the new state of California to the rest of the country—following the gold rush in 1848—the trio thought the time was right to establish a transcontinental mail service. By using mounted riders instead of stage coaches, the founders put together a series of relay stations along a 1,900 mile route stretching from St. Joseph, Missouri, across the Great Plains, over the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada, to Sacramento, California.

The venture was created in the space of two months during the winter of 1860. Ads were placed in newspapers touting the Pony Express, a mail service that would cover the territory in ten days or less. One famous ad said this:

Wanted

Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over eighteen. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred. Wages \$25 per week.

Like the two sets of brothers whom Jesus recruited who dropped everything for what turned out to be a dangerous mission, hundreds of teenagers volunteered to do the death-defying work of delivering mail on horseback. Mark Twain, who observed the operation of the Pony Express first-hand, said the typical rider was "usually a little bit of a man." Twain was right: the young men who rode the horses could not weigh over 125 pounds. Riders were paid the sum of \$25 per week—a huge amount of money in 1860 when unskilled laborers were making between 43 cents and one dollar per day.

Messrs. Russell, Majors and Waddell secured 120 riders for the Pony Express who were expected to ride 75 to 100 miles a day. During emergencies, however, some riders were forced to ride up to 20 hours or more in a day. Alexander Majors, a religious man, resolved "by the help of God" to overcome all difficulties. He presented each rider with a bible and required this oath: *I....., do hereby swear, before the great and living God, that during my engagement, and while I am an employee of Russell, Majors, and Waddell, I will, under no circumstances, use profane language, that I will drink no intoxicating*

liquors, that I will not quarrel or fight with any other employee of the firm, and that in every respect I will conduct myself honestly, be faithful to my duties, and so direct all my acts as to win the confidence of my employers, so help me God.

In a real sense, the Pony Express appears to have regarded their riders as secular disciples—men who would provide express mail service and tame the Wild West at the same time as upstanding Christian young men. In addition to a bible, the riders were expected to carry twenty pounds of mail—messages, small packages and newspapers—plus twenty pounds of supplies, including a water sack, a horn to alert the relay station master to prepare a fresh horse, a revolver, a rifle and another firearm. Eventually, everything except the water sack and the revolver were removed.

Only one letter has survived from that first westward trek in April of 1860. The first mail pouch held 49 letters, five telegrams and some papers for San Francisco. The route began on the 3rd and ended on April 14th at 1 am in San Francisco.

Along with the riders, the firm consisted of 184 stations, 400 horses, and several hundred personnel. The Pony Express lasted for eighteen months, ending in October of 1861. The stations were located every ten miles from St. Jo to San Francisco or roughly the distance a horse could travel at top speed before tiring. Typically riders changed horses eight to ten times each day. At every stop the rider would get a fresh horse and take the mail pouch with him.

The mochila, or “pouch” in Spanish, was thrown over the saddle and held in place by the weight of the rider. It was said that if necessary, the horse and rider should perish before the mail pouch was lost. Remarkably, only two mochilas were not delivered—thought to be the result of Indian raids. It took one mail pouch two years to be delivered, but it eventually found its way to California.

Like the missionaries of old whose ministry and martyrdom has been revered, so too the brave daring and service of the Pony Express riders to the nation has been extolled. The most famous of all riders was Buffalo Bill Cody. One Pony Express rider is said to have gone a distance of 300 miles, stopping only for fresh horses, during a 24-hour period. Billy Tate, a fourteen-year-old rider, found himself attacked by Paiute Indians. He killed seven of his assailants before he himself was killed. His body was riddled with arrows, but was not scalped—a sign of respect by his enemies.

Like the fledgling Christian movement which appeared to fail with the death of Jesus, the Pony Express lasted only eighteen months, grossed \$90,000 and lost \$200,000. The end came two days after the transcontinental telegraph connected points on the east and west coasts. From 1866 until 1890, the Pony Express logo was used by Wells Fargo, which provided a secure mail service (*Wikipedia*).

The legacy of the first national express mail service is a host of fearless riders who lived up to the Christian oath of the operation and were “willing to risk death daily.” Certainly it is well to remember the brave men who helped to bind the country together, and sometimes sacrificed their young lives in the process.

It is good to call to mind these devout pioneers during epiphany, the season of missions, the season of going forth in the name of Christ. Epiphany is

also the season of light, which derives from the journey of the three kings following the Bethlehem star.

Our lessons open by calling us back to the land of darkness and the prophecy of Isaiah. Matthew 4 begins by speaking about the start of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee. It says he leaves Nazareth and goes to Capernaum after hearing about the arrest of John The Baptist. Isaiah prophesied that this area, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, was a land of darkness. And yet this part of the world is noted most for the fact that it became a transformed country: "...the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

And then as the first rays of Christianity begin to be felt, we read of the original disciples that Jesus enlists in his ministry. Matthew 4 tells us about Jesus walking on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and seeing two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, who are fishing. To these two men, Jesus offers his stunning invitation: "follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And at the end of the reading, we learn that Jesus also invites the two sons of Zebedee--also fishermen--to join them. In the last verse of The Pericope, we learn that the four accept Jesus' call on the spot: "immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him."

Whether we're talking about being called to the Pony Express or among the first disciples of Jesus, you and I are left with the question: what about us? What are we called to do? Several years ago I told you the story of how the great English preacher, John R.W. Stott led a "Children's Church." There was a little girl named Jillie who was in his congregation. Jillie was ten years old, and she had been with the group that had been studying the gospel of Matthew. Stott said at the end of the year, the children actually had to sit for a written examination. The test had something like 30 questions, and then the pastor allowed himself a final personal one. Stott asked this: "Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. Philip brought Nathaniel to Jesus. Whom have you brought to Jesus?" And Jillie answered, "I have brought myself to Jesus."

To that John R.W. Stott said, "she was quite right....you can't bring anybody else till you've brought yourself" (John R.W. Stott, "Keeping The Right Company"). And there we have it--a collection of stories from the first century and from the nineteenth century--stories about two sets of brothers from the Galilee, a group of people who organized a remarkably effective mail system and a little girl from England. What they all sought to do, of course, whether on the back of a horse or in a fishing boat or in a church classroom was to answer the invitation from Jesus: "follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

What about us?

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