Epiphany 2A January 26, 2020 St. Mark's Lutheran Church - Spokane

 Isaiah 9:1-4 Matthew 4:12-23 Pastor Kate LePard

 It may seem kind of strange, but I often talk to people outside the church about their callings. I usually start with, “Do you like your job?” Then “What do you like about it?” The second question usually gets people talking a lot. Sometimes they tell me that their work or activity is a calling, after describing it. Sometimes I ask them if they think it's a calling.

 Recently I asked our tax accountant about her work. She said she really likes what she does. She enjoys working with numbers and she feels like she is helping people with things they find difficult. When I asked her if she considered it a calling, she said, “Yeah, I guess so.” She thought a bit and said, “I feel like this is what I am meant to do.”

 Usually, I don't know if the people I ask are persons of faith or are involved in a church. Sometimes they know I'm a pastor and sometimes they don't. One man I talked to farms. He believes that he is participating in God's work, taking care of creation and feeding people. One of my physical therapists had been a rocket scientist – seriously. I don't know why she left her career when she moved here, but she says that retraining as a physical therapist is very fulfilling. She believes she is helping people – sometimes with pain, sometimes with mobility, and, almost always, she helps her clients have a better quality of life.

 Our friend's father is a warm, outgoing guy. He used to be the one at their small church who honed in on any visitors and made them welcome. In the retirement center where he now lives, you might call him a “good will ambassador.” He makes the rounds, talking to people he comes across. If someone is new to the community, he makes sure to welcome them and show them around.

 The most striking conversation I had about callings was with a massage therapist. She told me, without being asked, how much she loves her work. She'd had an earlier career which she hadn't found very satisfying. Her mother was a massage therapist and she saw how fulfilling her mom found that work. So she decided to leave her job and train for massage work. She did not know I was a pastor when she told me that God had guided her into massage therapy and she believes that she is sharing in the Lord's work when she is helping people heal.

 Last week, at adult forum, I was so impressed by the couple who head up an organization called “Jewel's Helping Hands.” They currently run the only warming shelter in town. But they started out just making bag lunches at home and handing them out to people living on the street. As they saw more needs, like for blankets and hygiene items, they would collect things from family and friends to give to the homeless folks. Their work has grown and now they have two buses that have six showers between them. They go around, not only to shelters, but also to random places where people living on the streets gather. They offer three meals a day in the warming shelter, meals they prepare at All Saint's Lutheran Church where there is a commercial kitchen. Julia and Jason believe that they are taking care of some of the most vulnerable people, people Jesus has commanded us to help.

 None of these individuals I've mentioned have heard the Lord's voice calling them to follow him, like the first disciples did. Or, at least, if they've heard a voice, they didn't tell me. It's more a matter of head and heart. The head tells them they have the ability to do these things. The heart compels them to serve people with their abilities.

 You see, God's work is never done. That reminds me of a proverb my mother used to quote: A woman's work is never done. Have you heard it? I think what she meant was when my dad got off work at 5:30, he came home, put up his feet and read the newspaper... while mom cooked dinner, served it to him, cleaned up, supervised homework, got the kids ready and into bed, then did some laundry while dad watched his favorite television shows. Thankfully, that began to change with my generation as spouses share household tasks and child-rearing.

 But God's kingdom work is, truly, never done. The words we heard today from the prophet Isaiah were written at least 700 years before the birth of Christ. And the Lord was caring for people thousands of years before that. When Jesus came, he showed us the way of kingdom work: healing and teaching and feeding. When Jesus told Peter and Andrew, James and John, that they would fish for people, he had more in mind than handing out religious pamphlets or convincing people to come to church. People are drawn to God in the net of compassion. Jesus' kingdom way was healing, teaching, feeding- words and actions. People need to hear about the Lord's love and forgiveness. But often they can't experience it until their wounds are treated and their stomachs filled.

 The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that a great light would come to the people in Galilee, in the deep, dark land of war and oppression. In a verse right after the ones we heard, the images are so vivid: tramping boots of warriors and garments rolled in blood. Such suffering in the far northern parts of Israel! But joy is promised. A child would be born who would bring peace, a kingdom upheld with justice and righteousness

 The gospel writer, Matthew, proclaims Jesus IS that child. On Christmas Eve we read these words of the prophet Isaiah. “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end,” Isaiah preached. All these long years later, we wonder, where is that justice?

 God's kingdom work is never done. Jesus brought the light of healing and forgiveness to dark places. That is the foolishness of the cross. We killed him, yet Jesus loves us still. His followers have kept bringing the light ever since. Peter and Andrew, James and John, along with the other disciples, were trained by Jesus to take the brightness of kingdom healing and forgiveness into other dark places. Over the centuries, God has kept calling people to bring the kingdom light, to participate in the Lord's mission to love and bless others.

 When God calls you to care for other people, it doesn't usually come with flashing lights and clanging cymbals, or even the softer sounds of angel harps. There may be the occasional dramatic event but, usually, God's call is more down-to-earth, inviting you to see the Lord's work in whatever you are involved in now. Your current activities or work or relationships are where you are called to bring Jesus' light.

 Because you belong to the Lord, God's light shines through you. Jesus' love works in you for the good of those around you. God's presence is there in the care you give – in the light you bring to dark places, in the healing you bring to broken places, and in the hope you bring to despairing places. *(paraphrase Derrick Fallon, “God Pause”)*

 You don't have to make up things to do for God. The Lord is already doing things where you are. In all those corners of your lives, there are places where people need God's care that comes through you. Jesus created communities of light wherever he went, binding up the wounded, healing broken hearts, embracing the lonely, shining and shining and shining through the darkness.

 You belong to Christ's community of light. In this place, God's light is poured in through your ears, Christ's light is swallowed with the bread and wine. God has made you a light to shine – shine on uneasy places, shine on empty places, shine on desolate places. It's not that hard. It just takes some intentionality, some commitment to be the light. It's not that hard because you are reflecting the light , the love, the grace that has shone on you, from Christ your Lord.

 Last week we sang this song:

Lord, the light of your love is shining
In the midst of the darkness, shining
Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us
Set us free by the truth you now bring us
Shine on me, shine on me

Shine, Jesus, shine
Fill this land with the Father's glory
Blaze, Spirit, blaze
Set our hearts on fire
Flow, river, flow
Flood the nations with grace and mercy
Send forth your word
Lord, and let there be light

Amen