

When we came to Birmingham in 2001, I had recently finished seven years of working with homeless men and women in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The ministry where I served worked on a shoestring budget, and it still amazes me that so much came out of what was apparently so little. Over the years we continued to look for creative ways to together provide a hand up and not just a hand out, and we were able to do some interesting things. However one of the dreams we had that was never realized was to obtain an old hotel and convert it into a place of shelter, dignity, hope and transformation.

Shortly after coming to this church for the first time, I was given a tour of First Light, the shelter on the corner of 23<sup>rd</sup> St. this church started for homeless women and children. I was blown away. I know it started in our basement and not in the old Grenada Hotel, but here was this amazing, new facility – an old hotel converted into a place of shelter, dignity, hope and transformation. I know it's not perfect, no human institution is. However I was in awe of what some of her guests affectionately call "Da Light."

"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." (Matthew 4:16) These are the words that foretell the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is just getting started. For that matter the New Testament is just getting started. Jesus is just getting started, and these ancient words from the prophet Isaiah are re-called to mark the beginning of a new future.

This new future dawned with the coming of Christ into the world, God incarnate – in human flesh and form. From that time (on) Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 4:17) And 2008 years later that kingdom is still coming, and Christ's message is still pertinent to us today, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Repentance was the same call of John the Baptist, and in our modern vocabulary I'm not sure we really know what repentance means. That in and of itself may be telling. The Message translation reads, "Change your life. God's kingdom is here." Repentance actually refers to a change in direction, a turning to reorient our lives, which begs the question – in what direction are we headed? Where is our focus? Who are we following?

Our story in Matthew continues with this remarkable calling of the first disciples. Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother were fishermen. Jesus, walking by the sea, called them, "Follow me," and they did, immediately scripture tells us. As did James and his brother John, without question. I'm often not so quick to respond. However when I think of my own life of faith, what it means to be a Christian, I often think of these two simple words, "Follow me," and then consider the implications.

For starters, Jesus' coming into our lives and into the world begins with Good News. "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." Where there is darkness, God brings light.

This past Wednesday night in one of our midweek Focus@First courses, I had the opportunity to share with a class one of the places I find inspiration for my own faith. I'm a big fan of the Irish rock band U2. Years ago when I began listening to them I got hooked on their music and their rhythms. As time has gone by I've become more and more hooked on their lyrics and the message they contain.

In this class on Wednesday we watched a couple of U2 videos and some live footage from a 2006 concert in Buenos Aires. We also watched an address their lead singer, Bono, was invited to give that same year at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC.<sup>1</sup> He talked about his faith, some

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bread.org/get-involved/one-campaign/bono-prayer-breakfast-speech.html>

of his views of the church and where he sees God calling us today. “The one thing (on which) we can all agree...,” Bono said, “is that God is with the vulnerable and the poor. God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both of their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.”

“If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and the speaking of wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your *light* will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday and the Lord will continually guide you and satisfy your desire even in scorched places.” (from Isaiah 58:9-11)

Even in scorched places like the Granada Hotel. Even in the scorched places in your own lives. I’ll let you fill in those blanks. Even in the scorched places in this city and state that still need rebuilding, and I believe that one of those is our system of public education.

At the end of last year, Shannon and I led a memorial service for Minnie Holman Vaughn, at that time our oldest church member, who died at the age of 104. Minnie was a lifelong educator, and her service was held in our chapel because it was furnished in honor and memory of John Herbert Phillips and Minnie Holman Phillips, the aunt and uncle of Minnie Vaughn. John Herbert and Minnie Holman Phillips were active and dedicated members of this congregation at the turn of last century, and I think it would be fair to say that John Herbert Phillips was the father of public education in Birmingham.

He came from an immigrant family, born of Welsh parents, and he served as the superintendent of public schools in Birmingham from 1883 to 1921. Under his leadership, favorable legislation and local taxation were secured, able teachers were attracted and our urban school system was built in large part thanks to a member of First Presbyterian Church. We are the ones who have inherited this legacy, and my question is, “What are we going to do to carry it forward?”

You see Presbyterians from our earliest roots are all about education. I know how important education is to so many of you. Many of you yourselves are educators. And you like I know that our public school system is broke, and it needs fixing. There is a darkness there, and it needs light. I’ll be honest with you – I am not currently sending my children to Birmingham public schools, and I live in the city of Birmingham. If I thought sending my son there would change the school system, then I would. And that may be a cop out. However ultimately we *are* talking about our children, the children of our city, and the opportunities for their future, which we are squandering away.

This is a tough issue, and I’m not sure we are being called to go there. Just as I’m not sure that we are not. I do know that the John Herbert Phillips Academy, a new downtown public school in the former John Herbert Phillips High School building, is just now getting started right here in our own neighborhood. How might we shine some light there? I know it sounds crazy, maybe just as crazy as redoing the old, burnt-out Granada Hotel and building First Light. I’m sure people asked then what can we do about homelessness, just as we might ask now what can we do about public education. However I like many of you sense that we are getting started with some renewed energy here at First Presbyterian Church. I do not know what that is all about, but I do trust it is God-driven.

I’ll use Bono’s words from the National Prayer Breakfast. “This is not about charity, it’s about justice. And that’s too bad. Because we’re good at charity...we like to give, and we give a lot, even those who can’t afford it. But justice is a higher standard...This is not about charity: This is about justice and equality.” [of which we have little in the educational opportunities in our city] “It’s annoying,” Bono would go on to say, “but justice and equality are mates, aren’t they? Justice always

wants to hang out with equality. And equality is a real pain in the ass.”

Excuse me for being one too, but I hear Jesus saying to us, “Follow me,” and I’m just trying to figure out what that means as I look across the landscape of our city. Matthew tells us Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. (4:23) If we too are to follow Jesus, how might we go throughout our world, beginning right here in Birmingham, teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing the sicknesses of this day and age? That my friends, as I see it, is the question. Amen.