

**A Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany  
January 25, 2026**



*Come to New Life!*

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**Click Here for today's Readings:**

[Third Sunday after the Epiphany – The Episcopal Church](#)

Matthew 4:12-23

## Perseverance and Renewal

Yesterday the church observed Florence Li Tim-Oi, the first woman ordained priest in the Anglican Communion in 1944. She was born Li Tim-Oi in Hong Kong in 1907 and she added the name Florence when she was baptized, in honor of Florence Nightengale. She lived most of her life in China and endured great hardship. She was ordained priest by the Bishop of Hong Kong because he observed that she was already doing the duties of a priest, and there were no male candidates for ordination at the time. When political change came to China in 1949, Florence worked in the Cathedral of Our Savior in Canton (China) until the Cultural Revolution in 1958, when all the churches were closed, and Florence was reassigned to factory work for 16 years. In 1979 the churches reopened and she resumed her ministry. In 1981 she was allowed to visit family living in Canada, where she was licensed as a priest in Montreal. She continued to live and minister in Canada until her death in 1992.

As I thought about the life of Florence, the words that seemed best to describe her were "Perseverance and Renewal." I put together a short worship service in her honor this past week, on the theme: Perseverance and Renewal.

In our Gospel reading for today, Matthew writes about Jesus calling the first four disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John. All four stopped what they were doing and set forth on a new life with Jesus. These four disciples were CALLED. They had no doubt. Jesus called them, and they followed. Do you remember the words of a wonderful old hymn (#550) that describes this action? *Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea. Day by day his clear voice soundeth, saying, "Christian, follow me."* The same could be said of Florence Li Tim-Oi. She was called, over the tumult of 20<sup>th</sup> century China, and she followed Jesus with perseverance, which ultimately brought her renewal.

So, taking these two examples of perseverance and renewal in the Gospel story of calling four disciples, and the calling of Florence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can we see the story of New Life parish? I certainly can.

We see Renewal in the name of this parish, New Life. Through our 25 years as a merged parish, we see Perseverance despite many challenges. I'd like to look briefly at the past seven years and describe what I have seen since I came here in the fall of 2018. At that time, you were somewhat in disarray, somewhat battered by a difficult interim experience, and you were very cautious, understandably so. But you were in no mood to give up. If we need an example of Perseverance, it would be your courage and determination to fulfill your calling as a parish community.

You were beginning to bring your heads up from the depths when we were hit with COVID in March 2020. With reluctance, we closed the parish to avoid spreading disease, and we looked for inspiration to the Washington National Cathedral for weekly worship broadcasts. We were in no position to invent our own broadcasts, but I made many efforts to keep us all connected, including e-mailed sermons and newsletters. Julie continued the prayer chain. We persevered and were ready to celebrate with joy when the church reopened nearly two years later. We

have never taken our fellowship for granted, especially since we were deprived of our personal parish connections for so long. Slowly we began to reconstitute, to come back together as we so longed for contact. The small groups, Tuesday Evening and Wednesday morning, regrouped and started up again. We started cooking again, cautiously at first, but by now with total abandon! We have promoted new worship ideas, such as Taize services which now include Christmas Eve. Through it all, we never lost our commitment to outreach.

This past year, we focused on the real problem: namely, we are invisible. The church's location is a big problem – who can find us, stuck here on a back road? Vestry authorized an Action Team to work specifically on our invisibility, following the pattern of Natural Church Development, a process with which you were already familiar from your days with Rev. Stephanie Pace. Our seven-member team chose the goal of increasing our visibility, and we worked on specific areas that needed improvement. We started by writing a prayer, which we still pray at every Sunday worship and include in our newsletter. The prayer came with our adoption of a new logo, of a tree that is rooted in God's love and welcomes all comers. We issued a new brochure with photos of our activities. We contacted the local Hartsville newspaper for display advertisements about our special services and our regular worship. We improved our digital presence. We are still working on improving our outdoor sign. These are all positive signs of Renewal.

In the spirit of the first four disciples and of Florence Li Tim-Oi, we are answering the call of Jesus.