

Sermon Second Sunday after Epiphany A 2011

Isaiah 49:1-7

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

Psalm 40:1-12

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Our collect this morning has high hopes for us. “Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ’s glory,…” This is our call in this season of Epiphany. A call to reflect the radiance of Jesus that he may be known to the ends of the earth. What a dramatic supplication and one that picks up themes from the lesson from Isaiah where God says, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” We are here being illumined by Word and Sacrament. And once illumined we are sent out. (Evangelism.) This suggests that in responding to the call of God, in coming here, God has great hopes for us.

Let’s look to our gospel lesson and see what it has to say about responding to the call of God. Last Sunday, we heard the story of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist. Today the story continues. John and several of his disciples, his followers are out and about when they encounter Jesus. John uses this as an opportunity to teach the identity of Jesus. The next day again they encounter Jesus and John exclaims, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples then take action, they move in the direction of Jesus. Scripture tells us, “They followed Jesus.” Whereupon Jesus turns and asks the central question of life. The orienting question that we spend our lives coming to grips with, trying to provide a meaningful answer to. “What are you looking for?”

The disciples, Andrew and another, were followers of John the Baptist. They had come searching. Yet, their response to Jesus reveals just how difficult it is to articulate an answer to the important question that Jesus asked. It’s as if they don’t know what to say. Yet, their response is revealing. They address Jesus as Rabbi, which means Teacher. They, like us, are looking for a teacher, someone who can help them explore answers to the difficult questions of life. We too are looking for a place to turn, a reliable source. Our day is not much different from theirs, when disaster strikes, such as in Brazil or Australia, or when tragedy occurs, such as in Arizona, we search for answers. While we have ready access to lots of data, the answers to the difficult questions don’t seem to come any easier. Descriptions and data alone do not provide an answer to the question of why.

I think the disciples’ response reflects their willingness to engage Jesus, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” I don’t think they planned to follow right then, perhaps they wanted to know so that on some

future day they might hang around and see if they could once again encounter this “Lamb of God.” (whatever that meant).

Jesus does not offer a simple answer, he doesn’t give an address. Instead Jesus offers an invitation to “come and see.” As much as we might want Jesus to provide us with simple, straightforward answers, that is not the way of God. We must live into a faith without easy answers. Answers will take a lifetime to arrive at.

Jesus invited them to follow, “to come and see.” When the gospel writers use the word “see” they don’t mean catch a glimpse of. As in, “have you seen so and so today?” The gospel writers mean see in the sense of come to know, comprehend, and understand. Jesus is inviting the disciples to come and follow. (Will you come and follow me? WLP, quote lines, “and never be the same.”)

To be willing to follow is to give up our control, our agenda. That is what the disciples had to do if they were to follow, to answer Jesus’ invitation. We live at a time when we can construct our own reality. We live in a world that revolves around the individual. Our communication devices allow us to create a world where we are the center. Our lives can be filled with and controlled by apps of our determining. We join social networks only if we choose to. Want to be my friend? Just hit the “friend” button. Ah, isn’t superficiality grand. We can instantly know the status of our friends without ever having to speak with them, ever hear the pain or questioning in their voices.

I recently read an interview with a Professor of Youth, Church, and Culture at Princeton Seminary, Kenda Creasy Dean. She had been an investigator in the most ambitious study of adolescent spirituality from 2003-2005. That study found that three out of four teenagers claim to be Christian, but fewer than half practice their faith as a regular part of their lives. Most had a hard time articulating their faith. When scholars try to categorize the faith of these teens they have coined a term, moralistic therapeutic deism. The short hand definition is “that religion helps you feel good and do good, but God pretty much stays out of the way.” (Study from Synthesis, p.2, 1/16/11). But such a spirituality misses the mark at least from our Episcopal perspective. Dean concludes her interview by saying, “The Gospel story that animates the church is about self-giving love and dying in order to live.” (Deborah Arca Mooney at Patheos.com, June 22, 2010).

Jesus answers the disciples question with an invitation. An invitation to follow and to go deeper.

But contrary to hopes of those preaching a prosperity gospel or those whose faith can be described as moralistic therapeutic deism, the road following Jesus may be anything but smooth

sailing. We need only recall that John the Baptist was arrested shortly afterwards and eventually beheaded. Or to remember Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As the Second World War was breaking out, Bonhoeffer was teaching in New York. His friends urged him to stay in this country where he would be safe. But Bonhoeffer knew that to follow Jesus meant he had to return to Germany where he wrote his most famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He started and taught at a seminary teaching young pastors the gospel. He was arrested and imprisoned and eventually hanged just two days before the allies liberated his prison. Following Jesus is not all sweetness and light as some might suggest.

We go deeper in our faith by following Jesus, through engagement with scripture and through conversations with others who are searching, who are questioning, who are open to the revelation of God in their lives. Journeying together and going deeper as we search for answers to the questions of life. To do that, Jesus is calling for nothing less than the disciples' undivided attention. "Will you come and follow me?", Jesus asks.

The process of conversion is one mediated by the Spirit of the Living God. It is a process that may last a lifetime as we come to know this Jesus of Nazareth.

John the Baptist learned the identity of Jesus when he baptized him in the Jordan River. He witnessed the Spirit of God descend on Jesus and his identity became clear.

And with that identity, John also learned of a change in the very nature of baptism. No longer was baptism a water experience leading to forgiveness from sin. Now baptism was changed into an experience much richer than one mediated by human hands alone. Now baptism opens us to a new level of experience and relationship with the very Spirit of God. At baptism we become full members in the church of God, members of the body of Christ. Or as St. Paul stated it this morning, "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." That is a pretty heady description but that is what we believe.

Baptism is a point of entry, it is the earliest response to the invitation that Jesus extends to us, "come and see." Paul put it similarly when he said, "God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." Today four children will be brought into the communion of the church, the fellowship of Jesus. In a few minutes we will baptize Belle Hines Dalton, Sally Elizabeth Davidson, Boyd Dillard McCall, and Michael Landry McCall. Their faith journey starts in grand style this morning.

As Bill Hobbs has said at our Centennial Campaign events, it takes a community of faith to raise a child properly. These parents are coming here today and saying, "help us raise these children." Help

them come to know Jesus. Provide opportunities for these children to grow in faith over the course of their lives. Help them to become disciples of Jesus.

Faith is a risky venture in a world without easy answers to the deep questions of life.

Where are you staying? Where may we find you? “Come and see.”

This Centennial Year we will have many opportunities to “come and see” and to go deeper in our faith. Many opportunities to explore the questions of faith.

Bishop Michael Curry will be with us on Friday evening, February 25 and the next morning, helping us to look ahead as St. John's begins its second century of mission.

Our Lenten offerings begin in March with several opportunities to explore our faith further. On the weekend of March 11-13, William Barnwell will lead us in exploring our faith stories and journeys. On Sunday mornings we will have the opportunity to share our faith stories. Then our Wednesday evening Lenten program will focus on the questions of faith. Over the coming months we will have many opportunities to go deeper.

Jesus asks us, “What are you looking for?” God answers our questions with an invitation. An invitation to go deeper. “Come and see.”