

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
January 14, 2018
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The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." (John 1:43-51)

The word Epiphany means “manifestation, demonstration, or appearance,” A moment in which something formerly hidden becomes crystal clear. In the church, Epiphany is the season in which the identity of Jesus, his real identity, is made clearer and clearer to all who will look.

“Come and see” are the words we just heard from Philip in our reading from the Gospel of John. “Come and see.”

When you heard those words, what was your response? What kinds of feelings or emotions did they stir up? Think again, for a moment, about the effect those words might have on you if you were to hear them in an everyday context – at work, or at the gym, or the grocery store. Would they generate a certain sense of excitement about whatever it might be you were being invited to witness? Perhaps curiosity? Or maybe gratitude that someone thought to include you?

The words, “come and see” are both simple and warm. They offer a candid invitation not only to see something, but to come along and be part of something, a community, a gathering, an encounter.

These words of invitation form the heart of the scene we just heard about in John’s Gospel. Not only that, they characterize the entire gospel, which includes a variety of invitations to encounter Jesus.

Again and again, from the early disciples we hear about this morning, to a religious leader named Nicodemus, a foreign woman as well, an outcast man born blind, even Pontius Pilate, characters throughout John’s Gospel are encountered by Jesus. He meets them where they are - women and men, rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable, insiders and outsiders.

And to each, in one way or another, Jesus says the same thing: come and see. Come and see God do a new thing. Come and see as your future opens up in front of you. Come and see the grace of God made accessible and available to everyone.

In response to this invitation, some people take Jesus up on the offer, and they follow, while others are puzzled, confused, or indifferent. Some not only follow but invite others to do the same. We have everything from eagerness to skepticism, or outright insult – as Nathaniel says, in today’s gospel, “Can anything good come from Nazareth? And yet each one of these people is invited – some by Jesus, others by each other – to “come and see” [and, eventually, to follow Jesus.]

So, when we hear these stories, we are given an array of possibilities, both in terms of the kinds of people Jesus reaches out to and their responses...which gets us thinking about the kind of people we’d reach out to, the kind of responses we’d encounter, not only in others but in our selves.

“Come and see.”

Such easy, and hospitable words, words that lie, not just at the heart of John’s Gospel, but the whole of Christian life, really. Because they reflect an honest desire for others to see for themselves how God is working in the world and in our lives. I’ve often said that being a Christian is not about having the right ideas about God, but about having a genuine experience of God and then showing forth the fruits of that experience in your life. In other words, Christians are people who have been changed by an encounter they have had with God, much as the disciples are changed by their encounter with Jesus, and are eager to share that.

Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King Day, and I have been thinking how all this applies to his approach to the Civil Rights movement. King did not just preach the idea of nonviolent resistance, or try to persuade people why it made sense, rationally or ideologically or spiritually. He encouraged people to come and see... what it looks like and feels like to sit in the white section of a diner and ask to be served, or in the front of the bus and hold your ground. Come and see and experience...25,000 people, many communities of faith, marching into Selma, Alabama to claim the equal right to vote. Come and see God do a new thing.

We live in a different era than the one MLK encountered, and while many of the old challenges remain, our shared life has new challenges and triumphs ahead. Right now, the news of immigrants being denied their asylum in our country is pressing on our hearts...how do we respond as people who follow Jesus?

Whatever the era or obstacle we face the same thing holds true...when we tell others we know how our *encounter* or *experience* of God has changed us, it’s an invitation. It is not about cramming our doctrines down another person’s throat or questioning their eternal destiny, but simply offering an invitation to “come and see” what God is *still* doing in and through Jesus and a community that has chosen to follow him. Come and see.

And yet, as simple and as non-threatening as these words are, I wonder how often we actually say them, or anything remotely like them. I don't ask this to point fingers, but to acknowledge that most of us, including myself, aren't all that comfortable inviting others to our community of faith.

Which can be a big challenge when it comes to the future of the church, especially since most studies show that one of the key factors influencing people to attend for the first time is a personal invitation. It's not the size or reputation of the church; it's not the exquisite building; or the service times, the style of worship, or quality of the music; it's not even the brilliant preaching of the clergy!

All these things have value, and may be what keep people coming back, but the number one reason people give for coming to a church for the first time is that someone invited them personally - just as Philip did to Nathaniel. That is, someone said to them, "Come and see."

Of course, this assumes that: we have actually found something that is important to us at church and, that we are able to name and share that.

I have been pondering this as our vestry and I have been preparing for today's annual meeting. We've been reflecting upon our accomplishments this year and what we value as a community - and what it will mean for us, going forward, to grow, to welcome new members and draw others into our shared life.

To help us in this process, I asked two questions. First, what is your favorite thing about the life we share in this faith community? And then, would you be willing to invite someone you know to come and see and share this aspect of our congregational life that you value?

Here are some of their answers: "When we greet each other, there is a true look of love and acceptance in our faces." "You need to see how people interact during the Peace...and enjoy the diversity in ages. It's amazing." "I see Equality." "I see people struggling to live the gospel in their daily lives."

You've probably noticed by now that there's a sheet inserted in your bulletin for you to write your answers to these questions. When you're done, you can put them in the offering plate, or in the basket I have in the back, which I will bring to the Parish Hall after the service for those who need a bit more time. During our annual meeting, I am going to read some of your answers, and then I'll compile them on a handout to distribute to you next week, because they will tell us what we're really excited about, news that is good and so easy to share with others, especially with people we care about.

I said earlier that the future of the church, not just our church, but THE church, will rest on our ability to invite others to come and see what we have found in our congregations. And yet, I should clarify that.

In a culture that no longer has a vested interest in encouraging church participation, the future of our faith communities will be *largely* determined by our willingness to invite others to share what we have found. But the future of the church is, ultimately, in God's trustworthy hands. The same Spirit that inspired Philip and Andrew in the first century, and Martin Luther King in the 20th, the Spirit who reached out through their efforts to others, despite skepticism and resistance, is still offering all kinds of people all over the world an invitation to "come and see" and creating in them the desire to do just that.

No matter how confident or uncomfortable you are inviting others to church, trust that what you find here, who you encounter, and who you become here is worth talking about. Trust that all you need to do is tell it like it is, and let the Spirit do the rest. "Come and see." You never know who might follow.

Amen