

“Inviting Words – and our RSVP”

January 19, 2020 – MLK, Jr. Day

Star Wards: A Spiritual Practice for Epiphany (and Beyond) Series

The Gospel of John is different from the others. It begins with a message about the Incarnation - the Word of God who has been from the beginning and became flesh and lived among us. There's no birth story, but instead we start with John the Baptist and his testimony about Jesus. He's a witness who tells the priests and Levites from Jerusalem who he **is not** (he is not the Messiah), so that they can know who he **is** (the one who prepares the way for the Messiah).

So far, the season of Epiphany, the season of light, has confronted us with how the Good News of Jesus Christ is for the whole world. The presence of the magi with Jesus shortly after his birth tells us that God's love in Jesus Christ is inclusive and is for all people.

Last week, we read from the Gospel of Matthew about Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist when the Holy Spirit came on him like a dove and a voice spoke, “This is my son, the Beloved.” Baptism is a moment when we hear God say, “You are mine!” We are named and claimed - children of God.

Jesus' baptism sends him into ministry, but it's not ministry that he will do alone. Right away, he begins to surround himself with others who will help him. He is recognized as the Anointed One, and John the Baptist calls him “Lamb of God.” That image is a powerful one – the Passover Lamb's blood saved the Israelites from death when God delivered them from Egypt. In the Temple, a lamb was sacrificed every night as an offering for forgiveness of sins. The prophets described “a lamb led to slaughter,” and Jesus would redeem the people by being a suffering servant.

Another picture of the lamb was triumphant – a symbol of a great conqueror. And Jesus would conquer evil and sin for the whole world. He is the Messiah they've been waiting for! He is the One who will do something about the distance between God and us. And that is Good News that needs to be shared! So John the Baptist offers an invitation for his followers to see Jesus for who he is - the Lamb of God who will give his life in order to save us from sin and conquer death!

John also serves as a prophet in the tradition of the ones who came hundreds of years before him - those who point us in God's direction, even when we don't want to go. Dr. Walter Brueggemann says, “I think a prophet is someone that tries to articulate the world as though God were really active in the world. And, that means on the one hand, to identify those parts of our world order that are contradictory to God, but on the other hand, it means to talk about the will and purpose that God has for the world

that will indeed come to fruition even in circumstances that we can't imagine. So, what that gives you is both judgment and hope..."

John certainly offered both judgment - calling people to repent of their sin - and hope - pointing to Jesus who would offer salvation. John the Baptist points two of his followers to Jesus. Even though John has been preaching for the people to repent and be baptized, he tells people to rely on Jesus because he is the one whose sacrifice will offer God's forgiveness to all who believe in him.

John doesn't point to himself, but leads others to Jesus. John shows us something about what it means to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Christ-followers should be like signs that point to Jesus Christ. That's a tall order - and sometimes a little scary. I'll confess that I don't want a fish bumper sticker on my vehicle. There's probably been a time or two when my actions haven't offered the best witness to my faith in Jesus.

So we struggle, don't we? Either we attract attention because of our faith and don't share it, or we don't live out our faith publicly enough so that anyone notices. But John the Baptist reminds us to put the focus on Jesus always.

So after two opportunities of sharing who Jesus is, two of John's disciples go after Jesus. "What do you want?" Jesus asks. "What are you looking for?" I hear Jesus ask, and I think, "what is it that I want from Jesus?" What do I expect from him? Security? Forgiveness? Answers? Meaning? Fellowship? Rest? Time to think? Why am I here? But perhaps he's asking me something more: *Do you understand who I am? Do you know that you need me? Are you ready to be a disciple? Are you ready to follow me?*

The two men don't offer an answer other than to address Jesus as Rabbi and ask, "Where are you staying?" Maybe they're just curious how far away it is. Or maybe it's because they want to know what they're getting into. They don't want to commit until they know where they're going - where he's going. *If I follow you, Jesus, what will happen to me? What will my life be like? If I follow you, will I change?*

So Jesus says, "Come and see." Much is made of Jesus' simple response. It's an invitation to join him. Laurie Polich says, "Jesus is not asking if he can follow us; he is asking if we want to follow him." This isn't simply me opening my life to Jesus, but rather Jesus welcoming me into his life. We sometimes talk about being a Christian like we did Jesus a favor and let him into our lives - like he accepted our invitation - but he invites us to share life in him. This is about our response.

And notice - Jesus doesn't offer a map or a schedule. Perhaps you've found yourself at one time or another saying, "I didn't sign up for this." Or, "God, you didn't tell me this would happen." So, for those of us who want to know specifics, there's not much there. But what's there is an open invitation - "Come and see."

One of those two who went with Jesus, Andrew, tells his brother (Simon), and the Gospel writer tells us that Andrew brought him to Jesus. I wonder if Andrew said, "Come and see." Simon is given a new name - Peter - which means rock. We know more of Peter's story, but consider Andrew's role. This isn't the only time that Andrew introduces someone to Jesus and invites them.

Andrew is called the Bringer or Bearer. He's one who sort of stands behind the scenes as a disciple. He brings others to Jesus, including Peter, who becomes a great witness and leader in the early church. He speaks about Jesus, but he also leads Peter to Jesus. He leads others to Jesus then stands back and lets the relationship develop.

Andrew is a good model for us. He's content to serve as a bringer – not in the limelight, but as a person on the sidelines who serves humbly. He introduces people to Christ. And what a difference an introduction can make in a person's life! He couldn't keep Jesus to himself – and didn't want to! Experiencing Jesus prompted him to do something so that others would know Jesus, too. He directs attention to Jesus – not to himself.

There's an organization called the Society of St. Andrew - an ecumenical, non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to leading others into lives of Christian community and service. It takes Andrew's name because he was always introducing others to our Lord. An introduction means something. It can become an invitation into closer relationship, which is our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In your bulletin today is an RSVP - respond if you please. Jesus' words to us are always an invitation to "come and see," to follow, to grow, to deepen our faith, to understand more fully who we are and who God is. This invitation is for you to take home. Perhaps it's a daily decision - every day to "come and see" where Jesus is calling us to go following him.

And it's a calling to remember John the Baptist and Andrew - to witness to who Jesus is through our words and actions. Nobody can accept an invitation if it's not offered, and there are people waiting to be invited to "come and see" Jesus. You know them, and so do I. Personal invitations are the most effective form of sharing our faith. Trust is a vital part of witnessing to others. And Jesus calls us to keep on making Good News known in the world.

A disciple is someone who listens and observes from a teacher, and then goes out to teach others what he or she has learned. It's a passing on of information – in this case, a passing on of the truth about who Jesus is, about what God wants people to do and to be. It's also entering into life with Jesus - following him and sharing his love that you've experienced with others.

So take a moment to think of and write down the name of one person who has been a disciple of Jesus – someone who has guided you and invited you to “come and see.” Maybe they helped you claim your faith when you didn’t know you had it. Maybe they helped you keep your faith when you thought you might lose it. Maybe they helped you in the workplace. Maybe they showed you grace at a time when you really needed it. Maybe they just are good people of faith who remind you how good and great God is! Whoever they are, thank God for them. If they’re living, send them a note or call them and tell them that their witness mattered.

Our witness of faith isn’t about forcing people to change; it’s about letting the love of Christ work in us. It’s not about intensity, but intimacy. John the Baptist points out Jesus and points to Jesus. He tells everyone what he knows and what he has seen. Andrew offers an invitation just like he received from Jesus. He simply says, “We have found the Lord.” Andrew knows that Simon Peter has to experience Jesus for himself.

As we consider God’s call on our lives and those who have shaped us, I’ve been thinking about my grandmother who passed away a few years ago. Today is her birthday, and her witness of God’s love has shaped me.

I also want to remember Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - not just this weekend, but also as we live our faith. For many of us, he is a modern-day prophet - perhaps even more now than when he was living. He was honest about God’s judgment for the sin of racism and honest about the hope he had in humanity to do better.

Dr. Walter Brueggemann says, “Obviously, Martin Luther King was exceptional and he was dispatched by God in a peculiar way...but that doesn’t let the rest of us off the hook. And, the same mandate is available to those of us who are less gifted and all that. We are entrusted with the same vision, with the same scriptural tradition, and with the same work to do. So, we cannot just turn it over to a few designated agents...”

We still need to listen and heed Rev. Dr. King’s words. We still need to live our faith in Jesus fully and work for justice and peace as he did. We need to hear the words of Jesus who calls us all to ministry and commands us to care about each other without any exceptions.

Rev. Dr. King didn’t do the work alone. He was guided by the Holy Spirit and joined by many people and many church communities in bringing about change. King’s work wasn’t about him; he pointed to God in Christ as the Source of freedom and justice.

But we know the work of justice isn’t done. It’s still ours to do as long as we follow Jesus. So may we respond to Jesus’ invitation, giving thanks for those who have pointed the way for us and lived their faith so that we might know Jesus.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.