

Epiphany 2 A 2020  
John 1: 29-42

Many of the people I know who work in the church, both clergy and staff, look forward to the arrival of a new month, courtesy of the calendars distributed by the Church Pension Fund. These calendars not only plot-out the changes in liturgical seasons and give us some warning about upcoming feast days but they always have a cartoon at the top, often about overworked parish administrators or new (and sometimes absurd) ways of luring people into the church. Often, however, they give us some insight about the attitude of the church toward the way we approach basic things about our life together. Recently, for example, there was a drawing of a confused-looking fish in a bowl set on a beach, with umbrellas behind it. The caption was, "A Parable of Episcopal Evangelism: It is like unto an aquarium placed at the edge of an ocean, whereby passing fish are invited to jump in, if they so want." Apparently, as Episcopalians, we are content to wait for the fish rather than seek them out.

It is not that we are all pathetically easy to entertain (I'll leave that judgement up to all of you), but that there are certain truths about the gospel that are hard to ignore and they bear some thought about how we think of our own discipleship, especially our evangelism. This morning, for instance, we hear John recounting the baptism of Jesus, not only as a record of the event, as we heard from Matthew last week, but the weaving of the details and the testimony they give us about the identity of Jesus. John identifies Jesus as the Son of God, one he did not know, but was told by the one who sent him to look out for, the one on whom the Spirit shall descend. This one is the Son of God to whom John testifies, the one who "comes after me" but "who ranks ahead of me because he was before me," the enfleshment of a God who existed before time, one whose baptism supersedes John's because it is by the Holy Spirit. John is the first to proclaim that relationship between the Son and the Father and it colors all that Jesus says to the first disciples, this Lamb of God, Isaiah's servant who is a light to the nations.

In case we wonder what all this affirmation of the status of Jesus means for our discipleship and especially for our evangelism, the first question he asks the disciples who are following him is, "What are you looking for?" It is as much a question for us as for his followers: all of us are seeking something, things that the world around us cannot provide, ties binding us to each other and to God that the world cannot offer us, a chance to bring those ties, the good news of "evangelism," out into the world. And so it is with the question they offer him: "Rabbi, where are you staying?" To "stay," is John's word for remaining in relationship and the love of God, to abide, and it represents an invitation for us to remain in that love, one that Jesus sustains throughout John and is the only meaningful act of discipleship in the gospel. Jesus' own response, to "Come and see," is the invitation to witness, to observe the work of God and bear testimony to it in our lives, to see the transformation the gospel works in us and around us, creating disciples out of the hopeful, broken people we are.

Years ago, I had a lesson in the impossibly high bar that Jesus seems to set, one that even those of us with the best of intentions have found it hard to clear. I was fortunate enough to attend a seminary where Desmond Tutu had been a visiting professor; although Tutu stories were legion in that place, one was particularly poignant for me. In one of his classes, a student would inevitably speak about an encounter that she felt she had handled badly, or someone else would confess that he had hurt someone when he had hoped to provide healing. With what seemed like infinite patience, Tutu would take off his glasses, stare at the student for several moments and then say, "You cannot possibly imagine how low God's standards are." He was not trying to denigrate the efforts of these young people; he simply wanted them to know something of the infinite love of God, even when things go

awry. Discipleship, and the evangelism that attends it, are not exact sciences; they will look as different as each of us and the results are not always predictable. What remains is the love of God, who knows all that can go wrong with us and our encounters, allows us the freedom of our mistakes and loves us through all of them.

If you are like me, our preoccupation with our own capability is what keeps us from being the best witnesses we can be. If we take Archbishop Tutu at his word, the results of our efforts to bear witness to the kingdom will always be flawed. The alternative, to invite the other to “Come and see,” is central to the gospel; it is also at the heart of our own evangelism, our commitment to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ,” that we affirmed last week. As Episcopalians, as Anglicans, we are famously squeamish in talking about our faith, even our church. If we take seriously Jesus’ admonition to “come and see,” we simply don’t have that option. The stakes for the church and for the gospel are simply too high.

Central to all these stories and the story of the Gospel is to spread this news to others: the invitation to “Come and see” extends to all of us, to all who “will be strengthened to the end, so that we will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ,” as Paul has it. Our judgement does not have to be spotless, nor our motives; we simply have to offer ourselves, individually and as the Body of Christ in the world, to this journey we will all take together. In one of my favorite books, Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, the main character says of his own uncertain journey, “There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, for good and selfish reasons.” If there is a better, more honest experience of evangelism, I cannot think of one.

So when Andrew tells his brother he has found the Messiah and brings him to Jesus, who changes his name to Cephas, we understand the transformation. It is not only his name that is changed; it is his role in the grand scheme of salvation that was initiated by the baptism of Jesus and his encounter afterwards with the holy. We take our place in the larger story of God’s purpose for all of us in the same way. Evangelism is not an easy thing, especially for those of us who need to discuss it in personal terms: the formative influence of a childhood pastor, a parent who instilled the love of God in us. What we must understand is that these experiences are not entirely personal to us and we cannot wait for those who will simply land in our tank. We have to offer this news to the world so that we too can say, in the smallest of encounters, that we too have seen the Messiah.