

## 2 Epiphany A 2023

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 40:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

Years ago –

28 years ago actually –

I was sitting with the dear friend and mentor

Who would be preaching at my ordination to the priesthood.

We were talking over the years of preparation,

The experiences of affirmation,

The moments of doubt,

The sense of awe and the times of laughter.

After a while, he said,

So what about the gospel for your ordination?

Which of the suggested lessons would you like?

I took a deep breath,

And said,

To tell you the truth,

I'm not very excited about any of them.

None of them feels authentic to my sense of call.

He regarded me with a beady eye,

And was silent a long time.

Finally he said,

So, if you could choose a gospel,

What would you choose?

I hadn't really considered this possibility.

But into my head, unbidden,

Came a story of call from John's gospel.

Two questions and an invitation.

You know what passage I really love,

I said to him,

The story of the calling of the first disciples,

When Jesus says,

What are you looking for,

And they say, where are you staying,

And he says,

Come and see.

My priestly ministry began with that gospel story,  
And now here it is again this morning,  
As I look towards retiring from active ministry,  
And as we begin to reflect together on the times we have shared.

This gospel still speaks to me  
After many years of ministry as priest and pastor.  
It speaks to me of the deepest ways  
That I experience the life of faith,  
And the essential ways I understand  
Faith growing in community.

The three movements of this story –  
Two questions and an invitation –  
Are the most profound expression I know  
Of the powerful and subtle ways  
We draw near to the Holy One.

We begin with a stirring,  
A longing, a wondering.  
And then something catches our eye,  
Or a phrase lingers in our ears.

And then, whether we recognize it yet or not,  
The Holy One  
Turns and sees us,  
And goes directly to the heart of the matter  
With the question that sets the journey in motion.  
What are you looking for?

We don't know, most of us,  
At that stage,  
How to express in words what it is we are looking for.  
And so the question of Andrew and his companion,  
Which at first might seem like a non sequitur,  
Actually makes perfect sense.  
They don't have words for what they are looking for,  
But they long to come into the presence  
Of the One who has seen them.  
Where are you staying? is what they say.  
Underneath the question is a simple longing  
To come close to the mystery,  
And remain there.

Come and see.

Jesus does not explain in words  
What his followers cannot understand in words.  
He invites them to abide in his presence,  
To see and experience  
Drawing near to the One  
Who is beyond all knowing  
And yet as close as a beloved friend.

Invitation and experience  
Are the beginning of the journey.

There is no download  
That can bring faith into our lives.  
There is no download  
That can make us begin the faithful practices  
That increase our capacity for hope and compassion.  
There is no download that brings  
Meaning, and freedom, and peace.

Faith is an unfolding.  
The practices of faith unfold within us  
When we seek,  
And abide,  
When we accept the invitation,  
Experience the presence,  
And then share the discovery.

I knew these things when I became a priest.  
And yet, it has been in my years of practicing  
What I was called to be and do,  
That I have come to see and experience these truths.

I have come to see the unfolding of faith  
In companionship –  
Companionship at dinner tables  
And companionship at death beds.

I have come to see the unfolding of faith  
In conversation –  
Sacred conversation,  
And conversations that turned silly.

I have come to see the unfolding of faith  
In those moments when we draw near  
To ultimate seriousness and bow before it.  
And in those moments when we recognize our folly

And limitations  
and accept them,  
Without guilt or shame.

We have lived these moments together,  
Sometimes recognizing them  
As moments of grace,  
touchstones of faith.  
And without a doubt we have missed some of them.  
And still, the grace is there.

I remember a moment of grace  
Early in my time among you.  
The vestry was gathered on retreat,  
And in the course of a conversation  
About our identity and mission,  
Someone suggested that we adopt,  
As our parish vision,  
The phrase on the banner that hung in the front of the church –  
The testimony of Andrew –  
We have found the Christ.

(By the way, let me assure you again  
That I had nothing to do with the disappearance of that banner.)

It's on our banner,  
Someone said.  
Do we not believe it?

What followed was not exactly pandemonium,  
But it bordered on what has sometimes been called  
Vigorous fellowship.

Some could not believe  
We would disavow a straightforward declaration,  
An evangelizing witness  
To the truth.  
Some could not believe  
That we would trumpet a triumphant declaration  
That excluded so many searchers  
And followers of other ways to live.

Finally,  
In the spirit of group theological reflection,  
We turned to the passage from John  
To see what the story might tell us.

And there in the story,  
A gracious alternative  
To the straightforward declaration,  
Was an open, non-anxious invitation.  
Come and see.

Come and see,  
We have offered,  
Year in and year out.

It is an invitation that stretches though all the gospel story,  
That inspires and guides the church in every age,  
And that has given us life  
As we pursue our mission  
And live into our vision.

Through three seasons of the church year –  
Epiphany, Lent, and Easter –  
We will continue our journey together.  
We will keep listening for the voice of the One  
Who turns and sees us,  
And asks us the question  
That opens up a new world.  
We will keep following the Holy One  
To the place where grace remains,  
And discover again,  
Each time we gather,  
That the Holy One is abiding here.  
And we will keep responding to the invitation  
That has guided us through many years,  
Come and see.

And then, on the Day of Pentecost,  
Something new will happen.  
We can't see it yet,  
But when it comes,  
I believe  
We can trust the invitation.