

Come and see

Isaiah 49: 1-7

John 1: 29-42

[Westwood Lutheran Church, St. Louis Park, MN, January 19, 2014, Epiphany 2]

It was early on a late November morning in 2001 when Abigail and I were loaded into a van in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam - along with four other families - to begin a journey that would change our lives. We traveled south several hours along the Mekong River before arriving in the provincial capital of Soc Trang, where we pulled up to the local orphanage.

And then this scene unfolded. The five families gathered in an orphanage conference room, there were brief speeches, we signed an official document, food was served, and all of a sudden five toddler children are carried out by their caretakers from the back room. There ensues this remarkable cacophony of screaming and crying and picture-taking as the children are handed to their new parents - "Thuong, Thomas, our son, our beloved," we cried - and then we are off, loaded into the vans and on our way back to our lives, our lives as a family. What did it mean? How would it go? What could we expect? Would it be all right? If the six hour van ride back to Ho Chi Minh was a sign of the future, it would be chaotic! Come and see...

This scene, it seems to me, is a glimpse of what happens to all of us when faith breaks into our lives in our baptisms: a ceremony, cacophony, and our lives are changed forever - it is this wondrous moment of transformation, of being claimed and named, of becoming part of a new family, of receiving the greatest gift we could ever imagine to receive. Of being invited to come and see...

It is this story that helps me to understand that the gift of faith through baptism is not to be coveted or expected, but to be received. We are chosen by God to be God's child, we are named and anointed, we become a part of God's family, and we are invited to come and see what God intends for us and expects of us. Faith often disrupts our lives, surprises us, transforms what we expect to happen, changes us forever - and there is nothing to do but receive the gift and live as gifted people. Come and see, follow me.

This wonderful invitational text assigned for this 2nd Sunday in Epiphany reminds us that nothing much has changed over the centuries in the gift of baptism. Jesus himself baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan, has these encounters with John - you are the Lamb of God (twice, John proclaims, almost longingly). You are the anointed, the messiah. There is naming and claiming going on here. And then they are off, following Jesus on this uncertain path of discipleship and ministry. But what does it mean - what can we expect - it's rather uncertain and messy? Where are you staying? Can I come along with you. Come and see, Jesus says. Come and see, Simon and John. Take this new name, Simon - you are Peter, you are mine, there is a plan for you. Are you ready? Come and see...

It seems to me that these questions about the baptized life, the call to discipleship, continue to be at the heart of communities of faith like Westwood Lutheran and Augsburg College. And together, we are called to explore our individual and common callings to be God's people and do God's work in the world. But it's sometimes hard to know what to do, what to expect, how to be faithful when there are so many obstacles and temptations to decline the invitation of faith, to step off the path of discipleship.

And so I offer these Epiphany notes from the field about what it means to receive and accept Jesus' invitation to come and see...

Come and see...the gift of surprise. I love the quintessential Epiphany story of the wise men and its emblematic lessons for what it means to fall in love with God (again), to be drawn by something as compelling as a sacred star, out of our positions of power and privilege, on journeys of risk and adventure, finally to reach our destination and to find this remarkable surprise, this counter-intuitive God, this child in his mother's arms. And then to offer our rare gifts, to worship, to return home by another route, to be changed forever.

I think about the logic of this love story often when I reflect with our students about their vocations. I often tell my own story of the professor at Luther College, who was the source of my vocational surprise. The eldest son of a Lutheran pastor, surely my call was to follow in my dad's path. But when I began to question that call, it was a wise religion professor who recognized my love of the issues and questions of my dad's work, but not the work itself. So it was off to divinity school that I went, surprised to find that the narrative of my vocational journey could encompass the unexpected, the counter-intuitive, the surprise that demanded my gifts and an alternative route home.

I think, especially this weekend, of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and work we honor tomorrow, and of the journey that he undertook and the surprises he encountered along the way - often, unwelcome surprises - and how his vocation unfolded on unexpected and life-changing ways. Instead of the scholar's life or the prestigious pulpit, Dr. King was drawn by a dream to make a journey, to encounter the surprises of a life of discipleship, and to give everything to follow the call. Come and see...

Too often, we imagine that the call will be clear and direct, once and for all, we're so sure this is it, nobody said anything about surprises! Perhaps the wise men felt the same way when they reached their destination. But narrow understandings of vocation blind us to the possibility of being surprised, to the opportunities to experience the adventures and wonders our grand and mysterious God has planned for us, to the chance to fall in love with God again and again...

Come and see...the call to serve - Beth is like many of our Augsburg students who come to the college not sure exactly what she believes - and yet she jumps into the life of the college, a good student, a good citizen, and more and more an active participant and leader in our Campus Kitchen program, which collects leftover food from the cafeteria and area restaurants, and then prepares and delivers meals to our neighbors in the Cedar-Riverside and Phillips communities.

Beth begins to understand through her work with our neighbors how much she values the opportunity to be of service, perhaps initially because it feels good, but more and more because she begins to understand what she learns and gains in relationship with a neighbor. She is disappointed when she is asked simply to deliver meals - she wants fellowship and community!

Surely Beth shows us what it means to think about faith as a call to serve, not a finished product, but an evolving story in which faith is not a certain fact or truth to be grasped, but a life of work and service that reflects God's intentions for the neighbor and the world. And one of the wonders of God's call to all of us is that it is relational and social at its very core. While many of us may wonder what we are called to be and do, we may very well already be living our call in service to our neighbors and communities.

My teacher, Martin Marty, has said that distinctive mark of the Lutheran faith is acts of mercy. I'm also struck that the word that appears more often than faith or grace or scripture in Martin Luther's voluminous work is "neighbor." Beth teaches me how to be more faithful as she serves our neighbors.

Our students and co-workers and fellow faithful may most fully discern the unfolding narrative of call as they are inspired and nurtured to make a difference in the lives of our neighbors, to be of service of the world, to be God's hands and the face of Christ to our fellow travelers. Surely Peter didn't know exactly what was going on when Jesus called and named him, but he followed and he served. Come and see...you shall be called Peter and through you shall my people find their way in the world.

Come and see...the promise of abundance - I would venture that the most significant challenge we all face in being faithful and following our calls is the fact that we live in a world marked by a perspective of scarcity. And to my mind, the scarcity we experience is too often a result of wanting answers here and now, of fearing the unknown and surprising, of not being able to deal with the messiness of the called life.

Consider again our gospel for this morning. If we want firm answers, this is not the place to look. But if we are willing to accept the invitation to abundance, the invitation to be loved and claimed, the invitation to follow our Lord, then here is our call.

If I had wanted answers the day we received Thomas into our family, I would not have had the experience of this remarkable child breaking into our lives, messing everything up - and offering us life and love abundant.

I think of this call to abundance often when reflecting on what my family experienced when my mom died twelve years ago. During her final couple of weeks, she was surrounded by the vigil of friends and family in the hospice care center where she was lodged. My mother, who was a most remarkable woman, had been battling cancer for years, and now having made some difficult decisions about her treatment options, was in a time of peaceful and faithful waiting for the disease to run its course. Her large family - I am the oldest of six

children, all married with children of their own - made frequent visits to see mom/grandma, valuing the time together.

Our visits struck me as instructive for all of us as we "keep vigil", when we band together with family, friends, co-workers, congregation members and fellow citizens to pay attention, to wait for, to mark out time in preparation for some impending moment.

Here is the promise of abundance, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait patiently and prayerfully for God's will to be done. This faith reaching to a deeper place in our lives, asking us to remember all the ways in which we are shaped by the people we care about; to console each other, to be faithful partners in the work of grieving loss and celebrating lives well-lived; to learn how healing is more often about broken hearts and spirits than about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for things to come.

And when my mom passed into our God's loving embrace, we experienced what the hymnwriter John Ylvisaker has called "just one last surprise," God's promise of abundant and eternal life. Come and see, indeed..

One last story, another baptism story. Our youngest, Maya, was surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother Thomas. As my dad baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted for the entire congregation to hear, "Maya, shake it off like a dog!" As much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives - to avoid the surprises, the call to service, the promise of abundance - it is, of course, impossible to do - come and see! Thanks be to God. Amen.