

Come and see

John 1: 1-5 and 43-46

[Augsburg College Chapel, January 21, 2015, Epiphany 2]

The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich once said that the opposite of faith is not doubt; it is certainty. I think of this point often during the liturgical season of Epiphany, when we celebrate the light that has come into the world, and Christians everywhere are tempted to believe that all is well, certain even that the dark will no longer prevail. God has broken into our lives and now the entire world will see that we have found the way, the truth, the life...

And then I pause and consider the power of the darkness all around us. Even in the first few weeks of this new year, we witness the darkness of religious intolerance and violence, of bias and injustice, of hunger and pain and indifference. Where is the light that overcomes this darkness? If all is well (as we would like to believe), then what are we to do with the evidence that contradicts our certainty?

I am reading a provocative book by theologian Barbara Brown Taylor entitled *Learning to Walk in the Darkness* that seeks to address this tension of a world divided into light and dark. She writes: "...I have learned things in the dark that I could have never learned in the light, things that saved my life over and over again, so that there is only one logical conclusion: I need darkness as much as I need light." Her theological point is that we cannot afford to divide the world simply into light and dark, or good and evil, and believe naively that God is only in the light, while all else is left to the shadows of our lives. Instead, we must embrace the reality that we live as those called into the light while residing in a world marked by darkness. How will we learn to walk in the darkness?

Our two readings from the first chapter of John's gospel illustrate this dynamic tension. On the one hand, we have these soaring words from the opening stanza: "In the beginning was the Word – What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the world. The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."

And then just a few verses later, we are on the ground with Jesus in the early days of his ministry, calling his disciples to follow him. First, it is Andrew and then Simon Peter. And then we join the story with Philip and Nathanael. And it is Nathanael who helps set the terms of our tension when he asks of Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" to which Philip responds, "Come and see."

This wonderful invitational text assigned for the 2nd Sunday in Epiphany reminds us that nothing much has changed over the centuries in the call to lives of faith. Jesus, baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan, has these encounters with the first disciples. There is naming and claiming going on here. Jesus knows these early faithful, knows them intimately, just as he knows each of us. 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? You are the light of the world, but the world is marked by darkness. How shall we go forward? Come and see...

It seems to me that these questions about how to live as children of the light in the midst of the darkness, about how to follow the call to discipleship, continue to be at the heart of our common work as God's faithful people. 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 the 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 week, of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and work we honored on Monday, 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 and Philip and Nathanael didn't know exactly what was going on when Jesus called and named them, but they followed and served. Come and see...you shall be my disciples 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 dark, 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.

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. The light of the world/ Come and see, indeed...

Thanks be to God. Amen.