

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
January 19, 2014, 2nd Epiphany
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Text – John 1: 29-42

Just a few brief weeks ago, in Advent, we encountered John the Baptist, his story interwoven with prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures, testifying before the priests and Levites that he was not Elijah, the one expected to return to usher in the Messianic Age. That he was only “the voice crying in the wilderness,” preparing the way for the One to come.

Now, after the celebration of the holy birth, the arrival of the magi, we circle back to this same story of John the Baptist – last week and today – as the One he preceded comes to center stage, is baptized, and begins his ministry.

The story in this gospel of John the Evangelist that we just heard, takes a different path from that of the other three gospels. Here, we do not see the baptism itself. John alludes to it and witnesses to the descending of the dove. And here, unlike in the other three gospels, we don’t see Jesus at the shore of the Sea of Galilee calling the fishermen away from their nets to follow him.

No, here, it is John the Baptist who names Jesus as he silently passes by and testifies to those around him that this is the One they have been waiting for. This is the Lamb of God. Here, it is not Jesus who directly calls his first disciples. These first two, Andrew and the other, are followers of John. And now they have heard their trusted leader testify. And they turn, leave John, and follow Jesus.

Think about that for a moment. When you first came to Galena, how did you find a new dentist, a new doctor. Did you dial an 800 number or go on the internet? Did you ask people you trusted to recommend someone? Maybe you did both, but where did you put the greatest weight? These decisions may not be of the magnitude of following Jesus, but they show that when we are seeking something, it is often through other people that we find our way.

Each time I am asked to tell the story of my own faith journey, I have to talk about the people of the congregation I came to know as “home.” Oh, there were some internal nudgings. But I really didn’t know what they were. Just that I was seeking something that I couldn’t describe. It was learning from others, seeing their commitment, how their faith inspired and informed their lives, that began to clear the fog in front of my eyes and light a path for me. Now, don’t get me wrong. These were not holier-than-thou saints who spouted scripture! They loved their wine just as much as the Episcopalians! They were real people who

worshipped God together and who sought peace and justice for all, sometimes in very messy ways.

I am struck by these two disciples and Jesus. As they turn and follow along, Jesus asks them one question. Not “what do you believe?” Not “Have you been to the Temple lately?” but “what are you looking for?” They don’t directly answer his question. Maybe they don’t know the answer. Maybe they’re just as unsure as I was when I walked into that Congregational Church. Instead, they ask, “Where are you staying?”

They probably mean something more than where he is laying his head and getting his meals. The word “stay” in this passage means “abiding,” a more relational word. So, perhaps they are asking something more like who he is staying with – who he is hanging out with. Who are his people. Who is he? Jesus doesn’t directly answer either. Instead, he invites them to “come and see.” His invitation is never coercive, never has conditions. It is a generous offer to “come and see.” See if what he has to offer is what they want to follow, how they want to commit their lives. And we know, don’t we, that they learned by following, by seeing and listening and being in relationship with Jesus and each other.

The story doesn’t tell us what happened later that day, what exactly Jesus said or did. But it must have been compelling. For it did not stop with those first two disciples. Andrew invited his brother Simon. Then, Jesus invited Philip who told Nathaniel to “come and see.” And it spread out, wave after wave, attracting and bringing more people into the circle. That circle continues to expand. We are a part of it, and it is our job to keep it moving, to spread the “Good News,” to show this love and care for all people just as those first disciples did.

What they did was to evangelize. That word makes us a bit uncomfortable as it may remind us of unpleasant experiences – of being pressured, perhaps, to believe in a certain way, to fit into a certain mold. But evangel just means “Good News” and the evangelism of the disciples was not the kind that makes us nervous, that coerces or threatens, that requires adherence to a particular doctrine before you can enter. It is an invitation. To “come and see.” And that same invitation is ours today – we have received it, and it is up to us to invite others to find what they are seeking.

Today we will soon shift into our Annual Meeting where we attend to the “business” of the church. Yes, it is about money and elections and reports of the various ministries. But it is not business as usual.

As people of God, of Jesus the Christ, of Grace Church who have “come and seen” we do many things:

- We maintain our historic building. But we do it not as a museum to preserve the past but as a place to praise God and to provide a home base for ministries to those within our community and those beyond

- We reach out to others offering pastoral care and assistance to those in need, but we do this not as a charitable organization or a social service agency but as people who follow Jesus' command to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and heal the sick
- We offer formation programs but not to lecture and impart interesting information but to challenge and encourage each other in our faith and relationship with God
- We open our buildings to others for 12 step groups, for arts events, for weddings, not as just a convenient meeting room or a beautiful stage set but as acts of hospitality

For you see, being a part of a church community is not the same as being a member of another organization, or at least it shouldn't be. Membership often provides services, or maybe prestige—the health club, the country club, the DAR. Others are service clubs, and do good works. These are all good things. But our church brings us into a community where we abide with Jesus, where we are knit together in a body that is meant to be a light to the nations.

We are baptized into the body of Christ and in the Holy Spirit. We are promised that the Holy Spirit is already present with us in this faith community. When we come together each week, we greet one another in Christ's name and meet Christ in one another and at the Eucharistic table where we receive the bread and wine, the body and blood. And here, we are renewed and strengthened to see Christ in those beyond these doors and to be as Christ to them.

Would you turn for a moment to the person next to you and say just one thing you are seeking or that you have found in this place?

Amen.