

The Episcopal Church in the Pemi-Baker Valley  
Epiphany III 22 January 2017

As I read and thought about the scriptures for this morning, particularly the calling of the fishermen Peter and Andrew, James and John, I found myself considering a kind of progression, a movement, that each of us might have taken as we became part of the community of the followers of Jesus. Last week, we heard Jesus say to Andrew, "*Come and see.*" And then there is a progression, a movement of those called, not just to come and see, but to follow, to join and to share. And, like those fishermen, we are each called to come and see, to follow, to join, and to share what we have found.

Our first reading from the prophet Isaiah is one that we usually hear Christmas Eve, "*the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined.*" Those people that Isaiah described were from the smallest and most insignificant of the twelve tribes of Israel. Naphtali and Zebulum were not really much more than small clans situated in the northern part of Israel, near the Sea of Galilee. And because of their location, they were always the first to be overrun, each time foreign armies invaded Israel.

But Isaiah prophesized that for those people, who dwelt so often in defeat and despair, darkness will not be the final word. Instead, their frightening darkness will be turned to light, and their fear will be transformed into confidence.

Fast forward to the first century, and the gospel author Matthew, who also lived in a dark time of Israel's history, saw the light of Christ as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "*those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined.*" After the imprisonment of John, Mathew records that Jesus withdrew to Galilee, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, those same small Jewish communities. And it was there that Jesus first proclaimed "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

*Repent*, for Jesus, was not an injunction to feel bad about our misdeeds. No, it was a call for redirection, a plea for us to make a change in our orientation in order that we might be prepared to see the coming of God's reign in the real lives of real people. *The kingdom of heaven*, of which Jesus spoke, was not a notion of some kind of afterlife, a pie-in-the-sky bye-and-bye, but instead the reality of God's presence manifested in the world that we can see. What turning our lives around allows us is to see, to see the reality of God's love in our midst, even when others cannot.

The story is told of two taxidermists, who stopped before a store window in which an owl was on display. Immediately, they began to criticize the way in which it was mounted: its eyes were not natural... its wings were not in proper proportion with its head... its feathers were not neatly arranged... and its feet could certainly be improved.

When they had finished critiquing the owl, they looked at each other, self-satisfied with their evaluations. But then, suddenly, just as they were about to walk on, the old bird slowly turned its head – and winked at them.

To the first disciples, and also to us, Jesus says "*Come, and see.*" See what you were not expecting, the kingdom of heaven, the reality of God's presence visible, if you would but see.

There is a wonderful, brief, one verse hymn in our Hymnal (#654) that was made popular by the musical 'Godspell.' The words are attributed to a 13<sup>th</sup> century English bishop named Richard of

Chichester. The four line hymn asks simply: *“Day by day, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray: to see the more clearly, to love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.”*

That’s a beautiful sentiment, but its progression, if applied to the disciples, might be backwards. They didn’t move from (1) seeing more clearly to (2) loving more dearly and finally (3) to following more nearly. No, the first thing they did, most likely with very little understand of where it would lead them, was to follow.

Nowhere in these accounts do we hear of the original followers of Jesus first spending a year studying the Bible, or enrolling in an Education or Ministry course, or going off to seminary. No, theirs was an on-the-job training, not a three year course prior to adult confirmation. Nor, it appears, did Jesus ask them to submit resumes or inquire if they agreed with his theology before they were allowed to join in. Instead, he simply said, I have need of you; follow. *“Follow me.”*

H.K. Oehmig has asked, *“Why fishermen? Why not carpenters? After all, Jesus himself had been one. Why not farmers, given the way Jesus told parables about seeds and weeds? Why not merchants?”*

Perhaps the reason is this – fisherman *“had made their living by feeding people from the realm of the unseen. Jesus had seen them set out from the shore in hope and determination to find a ‘treasure’ that was invisible to the eye – hidden beneath the waves.”* And like them, we are called to follow, to see, and then to join.

For many people there is no memory of a time when we weren’t a part of the Christian community. For those baptized as infants and raised in the church, it just seems natural that we believe in God’s love for us expressed in the person of Jesus. Many can’t think of a time when they didn’t have some knowledge of Christ. But I can recall clearly the one who first brought me to Christ. It was my father.

I have told this to you before, but perhaps it’s worth repeating. My father didn’t grow up in a family that went to church. Instead, it was only some years after marrying my mother, who had been brought up in the Anglican Church of Canada, that he gave in to her wishes and the family began attending the Episcopal Church. In fact, my father, my brother, and I were all baptized on the same day – when I was about eight years old.

Still, my father didn’t experience a sudden conversion. His involvement with faith grew only very slowly, accepting things gradually only after he could wrap his mind around them, until finally his faith became a central part of his life. And growing up, I couldn’t help but notice how the fellowship of the church became more and more important to him.

When I was young, I used to think that my father was a Christian because he was a good man. But as I grew to understand and appreciate the failings we all share, I came to recognize that my father was a Christian because Jesus was a good man. And God does not call us to join others in following Jesus because of who or what we are, but because of who Christ is.

See, follow, join, and share. Share the love of God in Christ with one and all. Or in the words of the baptismal covenant, *“seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.”*

I love the old story, sometimes called ‘The Rabbi’s Gift,’ told by M. Scott Peck. For it may speak to our two congregations as we together seek and serve Christ in all persons. The story is of a monastery, which long ago had fallen on hard times. The once grand order was now only a shadow

of its former self. The number of active monks had dwindled to just a few old men. It was clearly a dying order.

In the woods adjacent to the monastery, there was a little hut that was used by a local Jewish rabbi as a place of retreat. From time to time the rabbi would come to the woods for times of prayer and contemplation, and often on those occasions, he would be joined by the abbot of the monastery, the leader of the monks. They became fast friends, and the abbot knew that he could always ask the wise rabbi for counsel.

On this occasion, the abbot asked his friend if he could offer any advice that might save the dying monastery. But the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," the rabbi said, "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

As their visit came to an end, the abbot said, "I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me, that would help me to save my dying order?" "No, I'm sorry," said the rabbi, "I have no advice to give. But there is one thing that I can tell you: The Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, he pondered the strange thing that the rabbi had said to him. The other monks inquired about the visit, but the abbot sadly reported that the rabbi couldn't help. "And yet, he said to me the strangest thing, 'the Messiah is one of you.' I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks that followed, all of the aging monks pondered the rabbi's comment. Could the Messiah possibly be one of the monks? And if he were, which one was it?

Well, it could easily be Fr. Abbot. He had been their leader for more than a generation. But, on the other hand, he might have been thinking of Brother Thomas. Br. Thomas was perhaps the holiest of the monks.

As they thought to themselves who it might be, they also speculated on Brother Elred. But, no, it couldn't be him. Br. Elred was frequently annoyed by the others, and could be a thorn in their side. Yet, in retrospect, Elred was almost always right. Maybe the rabbi meant him.

There was Brother Philip, but no, he was too passive, a real nobody. Yet, almost miraculously, Br. Philip was always there when you needed him. He seemed to appear, almost by magic, when someone was in need.

And so went their speculations. Each, of course, thought briefly if he, himself, might be the Messiah, but that notion was preposterous and easily dismissed.

As they continued to wonder about the rabbi's comment, "The Messiah is one of you," a strange and wonderful thing began to happen to them. The old monks began to treat one another with the greatest of respect – on the off-chance that one of them might really be the Messiah!

The old monastery grounds had always been a popular place for people to visit, perhaps for a picnic or just an outing. And now when people came by, without consciously recognizing why, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that permeated the atmosphere of the place. They found the monastery strangely attractive, even compelling. People would tell their friends about it and bring them to show off this special place. And their friends brought other friends.

Occasionally now, visitors would approach the monks and speak with them. This happened more and more, and before long one asked if he might join them – then another and another. So finally, within just a few years, the monastery once again had become a thriving place – thanks to the rabbi's gift – the notion that one among them might be the Messiah.

Each of us is called to see, to follow, to join and share:

To see the light that shines in the darkness of our world, to see that ours is a God of unlimited mercy and grace;

To follow, without knowing where that following might lead, to follow a God whose single cause in the world is human well-being;

To join with others who, while different from us, are likewise called to follow; and

To share that love, that respect, for one another and for every human being, day by day.

*Amen.*