

Sermon: Epiphany 3

The Rev. Mike Wernick

January 22, 2017

Year A

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalms 27:1, 5-13

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

John the Baptist began his ministry in the Galilean desert... and the people flooded to hear and see him... the desert was like the mountaintop... a thin place... a numinous place... away from the noise and competing voices of the city... where the veil between the manifest and the unmanifest could be entered more easily... some of us call it God's country... open places like the American west... where there is literal and figurative freedom... room to grow... room to breathe... room to be still and know that God is God...

But Herod arrests John... takes him from the desert and puts him... closes him up in a dungeon... authorities are doing what authorities do best... attempting to silence what threatens them... as John Shea said... the voice of one crying out in the wilderness must now thunder in prison... like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from a Birmingham Jail... maybe Herod is hoping to cut off John's connection to God... the connection which perplexed him...

And as soon as Jesus learns that John has been arrested... he heads out to the people... heads off to Galilee... makes a bee line to the place mentioned in Isaiah... right into Herod's territory... confronting political authority... this is a dangerous move... taking... as Shea also wrote... a message of light into a land of darkness... a message of life into a land of death... the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand... the Kingdom of Heaven is now... but the people are not... and then as now... we struggle with how to reach out for and hold that which has no substance... but which is more powerful than any thing...

There are people in my life who have been light-bearers... people who lived lives of quiet example... Christians and Jews... who illuminated a way forward... who lovingly helped form me... Vesna Jurick and Joyce Garvin... high school English teachers who showed me the beauty and the power of words... Richard Barrows... a humanities teacher who illuminated the common threads that brought together cultures separated by time and space... a math teacher... whose name I can't remember... who talked about there being so much empty space within atoms... that it was theoretically possible to line everything up and walk right through the wall... Pat Connell... the mother of a friend in whom I detected silence after she learned deep centering prayer... David and Clara Brower... my priest and my spiritual director... who created open inner spaces... for me to be me...

And there have been others... people in whom a light shone... and I didn't follow them along an outer path... along desert sands or riverbeds... into dry valleys or up rocky slopes... I followed them along an inner path... that took me from where I was... to where I am... a path that leads toward greater honesty... and receptivity... and authenticity... and vulnerability...

Peter... and Andrew... and James and John... were men of their time... tied to family... and place... and vocation... and maybe they knew how lucky they were to have these things... things which anchored them... one didn't give these things up lightly... one didn't give up a father's blessing... an inheritance... a close-knit family on a whim... maybe they saw those begging for alms and thanked God for how fortunate they were...

We don't know whether Jesus was waiting for just the right moment to take these men from their father... and their family... or whether it was just serendipity... something spontaneous and in the moment that he decided to do... but the Gospel tells us that Jesus said: *Follow me*... and their response was immediate...

And since we know that God never coerces... we have to ask... [?] what was it about Jesus that so fascinated them... that could so instantaneously break bonds of family and blessing and vocation... [!] it had to be their experience of light and life in him... Follow me... and I will make you light bearers... and truth tellers... and lovers of every human being... follow me... and I will help you repent... and turn from that which *dimly* reflects God's Truth... so you become lighthouses of God's Truth... follow me... and I will help you see God's Kingdom that is more than just right in front of you... because it is inside of you...

When I converted from Judaism to Christianity... it wasn't because I thought Judaism was wrong and Christianity was right... but there was something about Jesus as Christ that was fascinating... incarnate Word... human and divine... particle and wave... something that transcended labels and landed in Being itself... something which provided guideposts along The Way of more and more...

And the earliest Christians did not call themselves Christians... they were followers of The Way... they had no dogmas or creeds... they were fascinated with this man Jesus whose behavior was so at odds with cultural norms... whose speech exposed and led people away from Roman oppression and towards a truth which resonated in their hearts... God's irrefutable Truth... actions which spoke louder than words... they were attracted to *who he was... what he was like... and what he had done...* how he behaved... and not what he believed... though what he believed certainly informed how he behaved...

And we are on this same journey... you and I... we are going from where we were when we didn't know any better... to where we will be when we increasingly know better... we are on a stationary journey... of the mind... and heart... and of consciousness... from seeing the world through a mirror dimly... to seeing it with crystal... maybe even painful clarity... we are travelers on The Way... who once found it ridiculously easy to ignore

that angel whispering in our ear... our intuition... our conscience... and who increasingly find it a voice to which we yearn to listen...

[?] And so what fascinates us about Christianity... is it that our salvation is secured... or is it that we get to proclaim the reign of Christ not just on Sunday... but every day... not only through what we say... but by what we do...

We have a new President... and he has selected a new Administration... we will... as scripture exhorts us to... pray for our new leaders... and although we know that jumping to conclusions without enough information is like bungee jumping without the bungee... neither can we stop asking how collectively... they will embody the Gospel...

Here at Two Churches... over the last thirty months... Episcopalians and Lutherans both... have given up some familiar things... but we are God's children not because of what we have on the outside... but because of how we are on the inside... and how we are on the inside determines **what we do** on the outside... we are made for boundlessness... we are made to be light-bearers... to be Truth-tellers... to be fishers of men and women... not catching them against their will... but by being so fascinating to them... by not proclaiming the Gospel only on Sunday... but every day of the week... at Two Churches... we have an amazing opportunity to demonstrate how we challenge the divisiveness of the world... by showing how we can be different... but also One... we have an opportunity to cast nets within our neighborhood... to catch those who can hear the welcoming and forgiving love song of God...

Different religions... and denominations... and ethnicities... and different cultures... and languages... and sexual orientations... and fashions... and music... and family traditions... and foods... and political parties... and favorite football teams... will never go away... but when diversity becomes divisive... when what we believe matters more than how we behave... when those in authority attempt to silence what threatens them... and when our baptismal vows... to strive for justice and peace among ALL

people... and respect the dignity of every human being... are rationalized away... we effectively decide that we know better than God... and resist the light and life that Jesus brings...

Holy God... weaken our resistance...

Mike+