

Pointing to one who is greater

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We are now into the season of Epiphany. Epiphany is all about proclaiming who Jesus is. The dictionary defines an epiphany as an appearance or manifestation, especially of a deity, a sudden insight or understanding.

The revelation of who Jesus is really starts for the people of the first century with the shepherds on Christmas who learn who Jesus is from the angel. Then the Wise Men arrive on the scene somewhat later. They are not Jewish, travel from the east and proclaim that the importance of this birth is found in the stars that proclaim the birth of a King of the Jews. Last week if we had been here we would have heard the story of the Baptism of Jesus. This week we have a passage from the Gospel of John about John the Baptist proclaiming this is the one I have been talking about. Like the baptism of Jesus we have this particular passage from John every year. This message is that important.

The revealing of Jesus to everyone is the point of today's passage. It is worth noting that the gospel of John does not describe the actual baptism, but the focus is John proclaiming that John saw the dove descend. Last week in Matthew it says Jesus saw the dove descend. It is not clear who else saw the Spirit or heard God's voice in Matthew's account. John however uses this as the first sign that all could see of who Jesus is.

However, the season of Epiphany is far more than just the one time appearance of a deity. The power of Epiphany is found in the reality of the incarnation. The part where the Cosmic Christ of the prologue of John we heard on Christmas morning takes on our humanity, becomes one of us. The readings for Epiphany in particular are focused on the incarnation of Christ.

John points to Jesus who, as Richard Rohr says, is God's plan A not a plan B. There are two important parts of that sentence. First is that John points the way to Jesus, the one who is greater than he is. John is a wonderful example of the virtue of humility. Humility is something that I fear is in short supply today especially among leadership. John knew that he was not God. While he was important he was less than the one he pointed to. He did not do what he did to stroke his own ego or gain followers. In fact by pointing to Jesus as the Messiah, he lost many of his followers. He knew he had to decrease so Jesus could take increase.

I have often wondered if some of those first disciples he called were in fact some of his followers. Next week we will hear Matthew's account of the calling of Peter, Andrew, James and John. I suspect that they may have been primed to respond to Jesus' call by the teachings of John. Yet John doesn't try to hold onto those

who want to follow Jesus, he encourages them. And then the words are all ones of invitation, come and see, follow, seek, stay and find.

This invitation to come and see, follow, seek, all bring me to the second point I made and this is Richard Rohr again speaking. Jesus is God's plan A not some plan B because humanity was so sinful that God had to do something. One thing I said last week in the sermon that was only on the internet is a concept from Richard Rohr, that I have said before, but is so important now. Jesus took on humanity not to change God's mind about us, but to change our minds about God.

The Bible says in John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* Now listen to those words and take a moment to realize what this says. It did not say God was so upset with humanity that he sent his son in order to kill him so that he could then allow us into heaven. He so loved the world. Does that sound like a God who is planning on sending everybody to hell? Does this sound like a God who demands some sort of almost pagan blood sacrifice to appease his anger? I certainly don't hear any anger in this gospel in particular. John does not say follow him or else. There is no threat, just invitation.

Please note the invitation is to follow, not worship. Nowhere in the Bible does Jesus say worship me. It is always come and see, follow. Ultimately Jesus sends his disciples out to share the good news of God's love to all the world. Gone are the divisions as Paul writes. There is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free etc. This is a call to get outside of our little tribal worlds where we are right and everyone who disagrees is wrong.

Follow has two meanings, spiritual and physical. Jesus of course wants him to physically follow him but also this is an invitation to become a disciple, to adopt Jesus as his teacher and mentor. Philip responds by finding Nathanael and invites him to come and see. Notice Philip does not spend much time trying to convince Nathanael. His focus is on getting Nathanael to meet Jesus and then let Jesus take over the invitation to follow.

Those of us who encounter Christ and grow spiritually, will by the very nature of that growth, become people who act like John. Pointing to Jesus, inviting them to meet Jesus and then allowing Jesus to do the work. This course of action will then result in a second type of growth. This second type of growth is something that we at St. Aidan's need to focus on this year and every year.

The gospel is a treasure that is not given to us to hoard. The early disciples quickly turn into the first evangelists, the spreaders of the good news. As I was starting to work on the parochial report for 2016 and writing the annual report

which I will share the end of January at a parish meeting, we had a good year in terms of new members. The challenge though is for us to do even better. We have a unique parish in many ways and there are people out there who do not know about us. We as a parish need to do a better job of getting out in our community and making ourselves known. To be John the Baptists who say he is the one, come meet him. We need to be very intentional about inviting people and providing opportunities to invite people to come and see. This is what our mission is as a parish and we do a great job with those who come in the door. Where we need work is in bringing people in and that is an increasingly challenging job. The media has not been kind to churches filled with stories of doom and gloom and of churches filled with discrimination and honestly not welcoming messages.

We have a great story to tell. We have Jesus to point to who cares for and welcomes all who step into his embrace. We just can't afford to keep it to ourselves.