

According to the seasons of the Christian year, we just entered the season of Epiphany, which also known as ‘the season of light’. Epiphany always begins 12 days after Christmas – on January 6th. One reason Epiphany is the ‘season of light’ relates to the fact that the hours of daylight are now lengthening. But for Christians, the central reason is that Epiphany is a season where we desire that the light of Christ would shine more brightly in our own lives.

The theologian Robert McAfee Brown points out how Epiphany is different from, but builds upon, the seasons of Advent and Christmas. In his book, *What Kind of Messiah?* he writes this: “During Advent we *anticipate* the coming of the Messiah. During Christmas, we *celebrate* the coming of the Messiah. During Epiphany, we *reflect* on the nature of the Messiah... and we face the risky problem of how we are to act on the basis of that reflection.”

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The gospel lesson today tells us what some of Jesus earliest followers did when they suspected Jesus was the Messiah. Our text focuses specifically on how Philip and Nathanael became followers of Jesus. The 7 verses that precede today’s reading tell how Andrew and Peter became Jesus’ disciples.

John’s gospel is different than the other three because those gospels say Jesus called four fishermen to drop their nets and follow him. Andrew and Peter are the names of two of those first four disciples, but the other two are James and John, the sons of Zebedee – not Peter and Nathanael.

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But let’s look at the different way John tells the story of the first disciples Jesus called to follow him in John 1:35-39: “*The next day John [the Baptist] again was standing with two of his disciples and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. [Did you catch that? Based on John’s testimony, 2 of his own disciples’ switch denominations!] When Jesus turned and saw them following he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi – where are you staying?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Come and*

see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.”

That, according to John’s gospel, is how Jesus gets his first two disciples, and then we have the text we heard this morning when Phillip and Nathanael join the group.

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With that background in mind, I want to reflect on three aspects of this morning’s gospel reading. The first is about the interaction between Jesus and Philip. V. 43 tells us that Jesus decided to go to Galilee where he found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”

Many years ago, when I was a child, there was an evangelistic campaign with the title: “I Found It!” (Do you remember that?) The implication of the campaign was that if we search *we* find Jesus, in the same way we’d find hidden treasure. The emphasis of that campaign was the idea that we find God, or Jesus, or salvation, through *our initiative* to search and find.

But v. 43 emphasizes that it’s Jesus who finds Philip and invites him to follow. And this is more consistent with the biblical witness: that it is God who finds and calls us even when we are not searching. God finds and calls Abraham. God finds and calls Moses. God finds and calls David. Jesus finds and calls Philip (who then finds and calls Nathanael). Biblically speaking, our saving relationship with God is based on God’s initiative, God’s desire; God’s searching and finding us in our “lost-ness.”

So, the question is not if we’re seeking a God who is playing “hard to get”. God is not hard to find, but we can and do make it difficult for God to find us; to come to us and address our brokenness. Certainly, once we’re found by God we are called “to seek first the kingdom of God,” but our ability to do this begins with God’s initiative to find us and call us into lives of faithfulness and righteousness.

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The second thing to reflect on occurs during the interaction between Philip and Nathanael. According to this passage the **first thing** Philip does after being “found” by Jesus, is that he goes to someone he cares about to share about his

“epiphany”; to share about the light that’s dawned upon him.

Even though Nathanael’s initial reaction isn’t promising, Philip’s response is perfect: “Come and see.” (And where did Philip first hear that phrase? From Jesus, in v. 39!) So, faced with cynicism and doubt, Philip didn’t whip out a spiritual tract, nor did he engage in any type of scriptural debate or dogmatic argument. Philip simply says, “Come and see.”

Most Methodists I know struggle with the idea of faith-sharing. In fact, none of the churches I’ve served so far have had an evangelism committee. We use other words. Sometimes it’s called “outreach”, sometimes, “communications” and sometimes “connections.” Why? Because there’ve been so many evangelistic programs that seem manipulative at best and abusive at worst; programs that equip us with the arguments we might use to persuade to our “unbelieving” friends to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I love the observation, though I can’t remember where I read it, “No one became a Christian after losing an argument.”

Isn’t Philip’s invitational method so much better? “Come and see.” (And then you can decide for yourself.)

A few years ago I read *Deepening Your Effectiveness: Restructuring the Local Church for Life Transformation*. One of the key points is that worship and other church activities needs to provide churchgoers an easy way to invite others to “come and see”. I hope our worship services make you feel good about inviting a friend or family member to attend; where you can say, just “come and see, and then you’ll know why I’m at St. Paul’s.”

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The third aspect of this passage that I want to highlight is Nathanael’s “conversion” from cynicism to belief. In v. 46 Nathanael maintains that Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth, could not be the Messiah. And Nathanael is correct about that. Nathanael must know his Scripture really well, because the scriptures never once mention Nazareth as the place from which the Messiah would come. Even though Philip evidently knew enough scripture to say that Jesus

is “the one written about by Moses in the law and in the prophets,” Nathanael knows that there are no messianic prophecies associated with the backwater town of Nazareth.

I point this out to highlight how even our religious commitments and convictions can get in the way of our ability see the full light of Jesus. While Nathanael was willing to reconsider his biblically based views, the gospels tell us that the vast majority of the religious folk – the Pharisees, the scribes, the experts of the law, the Sadducees -- were unwilling to let go of what they read in the scriptures! Based on their readings of scripture, they couldn’t see how Jesus could be the Messiah.

Earlier I mentioned how, in the other three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus calls the first four disciples to “lay down” their nets to follow him; they had give up their work as fishermen – their source of economic security – to follow him. But the way John tells it, the first four disciples have to give up their religious commitments to follow him. The first two who came to stay with Jesus had a previous commitment to John the Baptist; they were his disciples. And Nathanael had a religious commitment to the scriptures. But to follow Jesus, Nathanael had to let go of his prior notions about what the scriptures said and meant.

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As we are found by God, and come to see more and more what Jesus is about, we’d best be prepared to let go of whatever forms of security we’ve been clinging to, and which may even include the security we’ve found in our religious convictions. Because, as John 1 tells us from the get-go, Jesus is the living word that we can never nail down, but only follow into the light gives life to the world. Amen.