

Divine Interruptions

Sunday, January 14, 2024

John 1:43-51; 1 Samuel 3:1-20

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On this bitterly cold morning, imagine a warm sunny day. It's the only way it is going to happen! Imagine sitting by a lake, looking out on the horizon, watching the ripples of the lake catch the light of the sun. Imagine sitting there, lost in a dream, lost in a thought.

Imagine light filling that space. Sitting near that lake, imagine what it would be like to have a friend interrupt your daydreams. Imagine a friend tapping you on the shoulder, just as Philip did to Nathanael. Imagine your friend saying to you, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

Philip's voice is filled with excitement this second Sunday after Epiphany. For the church, Epiphany is the season we encounter the light of the world, just as the Magi did as they followed the star. But Epiphany is also a time of seeing that light. In Epiphany we encounter the story of Christ that, as Diana Butler Bass writes, moves "from flickering candlelight (of Advent) to the light of the cradle, to seekers welcomed into the widening circle of light."

It is that light which interrupts Philip's daydreaming, a light which radiates from Jesus. Already in John's Gospel, John the Baptist has witnessed to that light. Already Jesus has encountered Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, inviting them to "come and see." Jesus, the light of the world, appears and interrupts their lives. He never says, "come and do," but rather "come and see."

Apart from its religious definition, Epiphany also means an immediate and surprising encounter, a discovery. Epiphany is a moment when a new neural pathway is formed in our brains, changing our thoughts and awakening us to new possibilities. In these dark winter months, we encounter the light of God, the true light which John says, "was coming into the world....he was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." This is the light we discover in Epiphany: a light that surprises and interrupts, a light calls us into new ways of living and being.

While we most often think of Epiphany as a time of discovering Jesus, John tells the story a bit different. Instead of the disciples searching for Jesus, John tells us that he goes in search of them. That is our epiphany, our discovery: the light of God shining in our lives in ways that cast aside any shreds of shame, self-doubt, or feelings of feelings of anxiety and fear.

The light finds us, much like the desk lamp from Pixar Studios, whose animated light shines down on the world around him. Jesus, the light of the world, interrupts the darkness around us—in ways that are both surprising and startling.

That is, in fact, Nathanael's reaction. He's not impressed by Philip's announcement. The fact that Philip tells Nathanael that Jesus is from Nazareth hardly helps. It's like saying, "Hey, Nathanael, I've found the Messiah. And guess what, he's from Hackensack, New Jersey!"

Nathanael gives Philip the side eye. "Can anything good come out of Hackensack?"

Can anything good come from that little backwater village called Nazareth? Nathanael not only does not want to be interrupted, he certainly does not want to be interrupted to be told the Messiah has come from a one stoplight town in the middle of nowhere.

After my freshman year of college, I spent the summer volunteering at two small churches in a remote part of Washington state. I remember asking the pastor where I could find the nearest McDonalds. He told me "it's about a 45-minute drive."

Can anything good come from a tiny, out of the way place no one has ever heard of?

Philip offers Nathanael the same invitation Jesus gave to Andrew and Simon: "come and see." This is where the church begins its work – not in giving people a job to do, not by putting them to work, but by saying, "Come and see." Allow yourself to be interrupted by that light of God which floods your life with grace, and mercy, and peace.

Allow yourself to be called by that light into a new and more meaningful way of living. Come and see.

This is the story of being called. Jesus goes searching for the disciples. He's not standing on a corner, handing out flyers or promising incredible benefits. He shows up. He allows the light of God's love to peak through the clouds of human struggle and pain. He beckons us to new and deeper understandings. He invites us to see how the light of God changes us.

Do you remember the story of how Martin Luther King, Jr. described his calling to ministry? In part, Dr. King said, “My call to the ministry was neither dramatic nor spectacular. It came neither by some miraculous vision nor by some blinding light experience on the road of life. Moreover, it did not come as a sudden realization. Rather, it was a response to an inner urge that gradually came upon me. This urge expressed itself in a desire to serve God and humanity, and the feeling that my talent and my commitment could best be expressed through the ministry.”¹

For the most part, whenever we talk about being called, we think of doing things. In the church, we talk about discovering your calling to serve. Let’s think about the sorts of jobs we “call” people to do: Make coffee. Take out the trash. Maintain the building. Repair the toilets. Set up chairs and tables; and then take down chairs and tables, and in some cases, repeat these activities frequently. Then make some more coffee. Count the offering. Greet visitors. Send birthday cards. Prepare budgets. Hire teachers. Put out decorations. Put away decorations. Order flowers. Water flowers. Set up flowers. Throw away flowers. Put out Kleenex, pick up Kleenex, make coffee again. Visit those who are sick, answer phone calls, send emails, print bulletins, fill up candles, make coffee, greet visitors, plan Vacation Bible school...what else?

In the Presbyterian Book of Order there is a section called “the ministry of members” which spells out about twelve activities or characteristics of active church members. It’s not a complete list, obviously, because nowhere does it mention setting up chairs or making coffee. I’ve decided we need to sponsor an amendment at the next General Assembly that inserts “make coffee” into the list of responsibilities! But instead of doing particular tasks, the ministry of members is centered around “demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church.” Members are called to study scripture, to lift up one another in prayer, to offer our gifts, to respond to God’s activity in the world through service. In other words, more attention is spent on “coming and seeing” or perhaps “coming and being” than just “going and doing.”

In 1 Samuel, we hear God interrupting Samuel’s sleep. The young boy has no way of understanding what is happening. So, he runs and finds Eli, shakes him, wakes him up, and says, “Did you call for me?” By the time this has happened several times, Eli suddenly realizes what is happening. It isn’t that Samuel wants a drink of water or that he’s had a

¹ <https://medium.com/christian-citizen/kings-call-accepting-the-challenge-to-enter-ministry-2aa9d90b64d7>

bad dream. He's being summoned by God. So Eli tells him to go and see...to attend to the call God is sending him.

Our eldest daughter, Katie, has always had a serious sense of the "fear of missing out," or "FOMO." To our absolute delight, her own daughter seems to have inherited this trait as well! One time when Katie was still a toddler, Carol and I were watching television around nine at night. The girls were all asleep, and we finally had a moment to ourselves. A commercial for Domino's pizza came on the air. It was a moment of divine intervention: we were salivating, looking at each other and saying, "Oooh...a pizza does sound good." In that moment we did something we had never done before, which was call and order a late-night pizza delivery.

We waited by the door so the dog wouldn't bark when the pizza was delivered. We tiptoed into the kitchen and opened the box...and that's when we heard a little voice saying to us, "I knew it! I knew it! I knew you guys always had parties after we went to sleep!" Sometimes interruptions mean you have to share your pizza.

When Nathanael is interrupted by Jesus, he wonders how Jesus knows so much about him. There's a curious moment as Jesus responds, "I saw you under the fig tree." The fig tree, remember, is the tree from which Adam and Eve found materials to clothe themselves. The fig tree is the place they went to hide in their shame.

This is where Jesus sees Nathanael. He sees him sitting under the tree where his ancestors had tried to hide in their shame. It was a moment of interrupting all the ways Nathanael had been trying to hide himself from as well. Jesus sees him, and calls him to follow.

It was a moment of Epiphany, an interruption that led to an invitation. What a difference it makes if we allow ourselves to be found by God. What a difference it makes when Jesus disrupts the interior conversations that rush through our heads forever telling us we're not good enough, we have not done enough, we haven't worked hard enough. Instead, he is like the Dominos delivery man at midnight, standing at the door and saying to us, "Come and see the feast God has prepared for you. Od Come and see the waters of baptism which offer us forgiveness. Come and see the One who brings salvation. Come and see...the one who calls us to love."

Amen.