

Is one candle enough to light a room?

When I was a kid we went a number of times to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. In the old days, you used to have to walk into the cavern with park rangers. But the neat thing was that halfway down, the rangers would sit everyone down. They would caution the parents to hold their children, and then turn they would turn off the lights. They've stopped doing that. You now walk in on your own, and the lights stay on.

But today you can take a special tour with a couple of rangers of three caverns that are not on the self-guided tour. And in the second of those three cavern they sit you down, and turn off the lights.

The darkness of the deep cave is astounding. No starlight. No streetlights. No light of any kind. Total darkness. You can't see the shadow of your hand in front of your face.

And then, the ranger lights a match. A single match. A single match in a cave the size of a high school gymnasium. And yet, that single match lights up the whole cave. After experiencing total darkness, the light of one match is sufficient to light everything.

The season of Epiphany is a time when we focus on the Light of Christ being kindled in the midst of total darkness. During Epiphany, we focus on Jesus' light blazing forth from humble beginnings. The season begins with the Wisemen bringing gifts to a baby in Bethlehem. Last week we read of that light being made apparent in Jesus' baptism. The next two weeks, we'll read of Jesus calling his disciples. Next week we will hear from Mark. But this week, we get an interlude from John.

In our Gospel reading this morning from John, we find two very short 3 syllable phrases: "Follow me" & "come and see." Very short. Only 3 syllables each. "Follow me" & "come and see." But don't be fooled by the brevity of these commands. Both phrases are vitally important to the spread of the Gospel. Both messages are integral parts of our callings as Christians.

The first message is spoken by Jesus. The context is rather simple. John says, "(Jesus) found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'"

That's it. No elaboration. No explanations. No promises. Simply Jesus' voice saying, "Follow me."

To be obedient to God, one must do two things. One must hear God's call. And one must heed God's call. When Jesus said to Philip, "Follow me," Philip does both. Philip hears, and Philip obeys. John doesn't tell us any more than that.

I suspect that there must have been something special about Jesus that made Philip follow. We know from other parts of the New Testament that Philip's life was changed by his encounter with Jesus Christ. But in a real way, the details of that change are not as important as what Philip did afterwards.

After Jesus tells Philip, "Follow me," the next thing Philip does, is to go to Nathanael and basically tell him, 'We've found him; he's the one; he's the Messiah.' Philip says, "We've found the guy Moses and the prophets wrote about, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathanael isn't very impressed. The Messiah should be someone important. He should be from someplace important. But Jesus is a common name, there's nothing that sounds special about it. And Nazareth is a common town, only about six miles from Nathanael's hometown of Cana. If high school football had been around back then, the Cana/Nazareth game every year would have been a big rivalry.

So when Philip says, 'We've found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.' Nathanael's reply should be expected. 'Nazareth?!' "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

And Philip's response is wonderful. Philip's reply is wonderful evangelism. He doesn't try to argue with Philip. Instead, Philip says three words: "Come and see."

Come and see. Philip has had a life changing encounter with Jesus Christ. He hears Jesus' call, "Follow me." And he invites others in as well. "Come and see."

All Philip does is lead the horse to water. It's up to Nathanael to take the drink.

Philip's method of evangelism is a wonderful model for us. Philip's style of evangelism is not waving a Bible in someone's face. Philip's style of evangelism is not preaching a fire and brimstone sermon, then having an altar call and singing "Just as I am." It is simply the invitation, "Come and see." Low key. Yet very effective. "Come and see."

When Nathanael does come, he's impressed by Jesus. He even says, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" But the reason Nathanael is there to make that statement is because Philip first said, "Come and see."

Phillips model is very simple. And it's very effective. First you have to hear God's call in your life. Then you to respond to God's call by sharing it with others.

But there are two impediments to such a model. The first is an inability to hear. The second is an unwillingness to share.

The first impediment is illustrated in our OT lesson from 1Samuel ch3. The first verse of ch3 is telling:

"The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

I wonder why. Was God not speaking to the people? Or were the people not listening? If the people of Israel 3,000 years ago were anything like us, I suspect that the word of the Lord was rare because people weren't listening.

But even when God speaks, it's difficult to know that God is speaking. That's young Samuel's problem. The Lord calls to him, "Samuel, Samuel." And three times, Samuel mistakes God's voice for the voice of his mentor, Eli. He keeps running to Eli, and Eli keeps saying, "I didn't call you."

But, the third time this happens, Eli figures it out. And Eli tells Samuel to say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

And when God calls the fourth time, Samuel is able to say, Speak, for your servant is listening.

Eventually, Samuel listens to what God says, just as Philip listens to the words, "Follow me." But Samuel doesn't just listen, he obeys. He does what God asks. But he does even more.

He shares with others the things God says. He doesn't keep what God gives him to himself. He tells others about it. So by the time he is an adult, a mere 10 verses after our lesson, there is this comment: "All Israel... knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord." Because of Samuel's obedience coupled with his faithfulness, the Lord's voice was again heard in Israel.

With Samuel, with Philip, the first step is to listen to God. You have to be open to his voice. You have to heed the call, follow me. In the midst of the dark cave, you must turn to the light that shines forth. That's step 1.

But there's a step 2. You must do something with what you've been given. We're so hesitant to do that. Yet it's as simple as saying, "Come and see."

A single flame can light an entire room. But it can do so much more. The fire on the wick of one candle gives light, but the light is small. However, there is something that can be done to increase the light. Candle fire is contagious.

When we light the altar candles each week, we don't flick a switch and have them all come on at once. We light one flame. And then we take that flame from candle to candle. All the candles can be brightly lit from one flame.

During Epiphany, we remember that the light of Christ has spread in this same way. The flame of Jesus Christ has been passed on from candle to candle over the miles and down through the centuries.

Epiphany is something we're all called to participate in. We are called to be bearers of the light of Christ. We are called to carry the torch. To share the flame.

Listen when Jesus says, "Follow me." Then say to others, "Come and see." The light shines in the darkness. Share that light.