

The season of Epiphany is a time when we focus on the Light of Christ shining forth in the darkness. During Epiphany, we focus on Jesus' light blazing forth from humble beginnings. Epiphany is like the ripples when you drop a rock into water. Epiphany is about Jesus' light, about the Good News, the Gospel expanding, propagating outward like ripples in a pond.

The season begins with the Wisemen bringing gifts to God's light made flesh, God's incarnate presence in a baby in Bethlehem. Last week we read about Jesus' divine nature being made more apparent in his baptism. The next two weeks, we'll read of Jesus calling his disciples. These followers will help carry Jesus' message, his light, out further and further into the world. Next week we hear from Mark. This week, we hear from John.

In the Gospel reading this morning from John 1, we find two very short 3 syllable phrases. 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 did both. Philip heard, and Philip obeyed. John doesn't tell us any more than 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 told Philip, "Follow me," the next thing Philip did, was to go to his friend Nathanael and basically tell him, 'We've found him; he's the one; he's the Messiah.' Philip says, "We've found the one 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 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 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's heard Jesus' call, "Follow me." And he invites others in as well. "Come and see."

All Philip has to do 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."

Phillip's 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.

As Jesus' followers, we're called to follow. And we're called to invite others to come and follow him. We're called to help carry his message, his light, out further and further into the world.

I know, this kind of talk tends to make Episcopalians nervous. And it's not been part of our tradition at St. Paul's. Sharing the Good News. Can't we leave that to someone else?

No, we can't. It's up to us. There was a time, a time some of us can remember in the 1950s and 60s when the church would grow automatically. If you build it, they will come.

But we no longer live in such a time. We live in an era when Christianity is declining in our culture. A few congregations here and there may be growing. But on the whole, Christianity is shrinking in our country.

Is there anything we can do about it? Yes, there is.

THE #1 way to bring new people into the church is to personally invite them. Not to advertise, or put out a sign, or put up a web page. The #1 way that brings new people to a church is for one of their friends or acquaintances invites them. That's tough to do. That's scary. But it's still the best way. To say, "Come and see." To invite others to come to a place where they can hear Jesus say, "Follow me."

And we have to have the right motives. We have to invite people and welcome people for their own spiritual good.

We don't want new people to come to increase the budget or to put more warm bodies in the pews. That's self-serving. That's not a reason to invite people in.

We don't want new people just to replace the folks we've lost to death or to moves. That's self serving. That's about preserving St. Paul's as an institution. That's operating out of fear. I hear it, though. "We have to have new folks because we're afraid we'll decline or even die as a congregation."

That's a horrible reason to bring new people in. Institutional survival.

Sometimes people think we should change and be like other churches. Maybe we can siphon off some of their members. But we're not in competition with other churches. We're all on the same team. We all share the same mission.

As our baptismal service reminds us, we're in competition with the spiritual forces of darkness and wickedness that rebel against God. We're in competition with the evil forces in this world that corrupt and destroy God's people. We're in completion with sinful desires that pull people away from God, desires to put other things first in our lives, desires to do things our way rather than God's way.

No. We want people to come to worship the living God... To grow in knowledge and love of him... To serve his people...

We want people to come for the health of their spirits and their souls. We want people to come to be fed at God's table with the gifts he offers. We want people to come so we can encourage them and they can encourage us in our day to day lives. We want people to come so that we can spread God's love and light to them and so that they can spread God's love and light to others.

Come and see. Come and see.

We don't need to change our core values as a congregation. We don't need to change our mission. We need to live into our mission. We need to be proud of our unique identity and the unique gifts we offer as a part of Christ's larger church.

During Epiphany, we celebrate the light that shines forth in the midst of the darkness all around us.

Jesus has come. He says, "Follow me." You have to be open to his voice. You have to heed the call, follow me. In the midst of the darkness, you must turn toward the light.

But there's something more. You must do something with what you've been given. Once you've received the light, you are called to share the light. We're so hesitant to do that. Yet it's as simple as saying, "Come and see."

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. The flame can be passed from candle to candle, and a room full of candles can be brightly lit from the fire of one lone candle.

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.

Jesus says to you, "Follow me."
You say to others, "Come and see."