

A sermon by the Rev. Wendy DeFoe Lane for 2 Epiphany
January 20, 2008; The Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest, Illinois
Year A: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-10; I Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

“Come and See!”

The story, as I remember it being told on NPR earlier this week, began with a description of the young men. They were sitting in a coffee bar somewhere in the occupied West Bank, sipping piping hot and very bitter coffee, speaking with a reporter. There were two of them, quite young, both just barely eighteen.....each with just enough facial hair to make a straggly beard. They were proud and excited to announce that they were two of the newest recruits of the terrorist group, Islamic Jihad.....that they were presently taking rigorous training and when that was accomplished, they would be ecstatic to kill infidels for Allah.....that they would die in the attempt of suicide bombing was of no consequence.....they would be martyrs in the name of their God.....they would instantly be transported to heaven and live in the presence of the Holy One. Their families would be revered in the community; they would be looked after.....in fact, they would become rich by Palestinian standards.

Neither young man expressed any confidence that the visit to the region last week of the American president, George Bush, would make any difference to the peace process.....they were convinced that any optimism on their part would be shattered.....in a day, in a week, in a month.....shattered by more violence and death.

Are these two tender young men true disciples of their God? They honestly believe they have answered the call, “Come and See.”

“Come and See!”

The places this week in our busy primary season have been Nevada and South Carolina. The persons calling us to follow them are the myriad candidates..... Each is seeking our support to gain the nomination, to run for president of the United States of America. Each has a platform; each has a promise for a better tomorrow, a plan for Iraq, a way out of our crushing debt, an answer for the ills of Social Security and our ailing health care system. One offers the audacity of hope, while another offers security from the threat of terrorism, yet another offers to follow Osama Bin Laden to the “gates of hell” in order to bring him to justice.....another hopeful rails about living in a country that boasts of two Americas.....one rich and the other poor.....all of them are trying to appeal to something stirring deep inside each one of us that will resonate with their particular message. The election here in Illinois will be here before we know it.....will you vote, will you answer the call?

“Come and See!”

The place is anywhere, USA. It certainly draws well here on the North Shore in most of our homes and communities. It is the pull of our secular culture.....a culture that promises that success and the trappings of wealth and power will bring fulfillment, peace, and happiness.....a culture of status.....the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, the high-voltage careers we pursue, the places we go on vacation.....a culture that is stealing childhood from our youth.....by sexualizing them too early and desensitizing them to violence and the blurring of the distinction between right and wrong.....this is a culture where my two grandsons, nine and twelve, debate the morality of using

steroids to enhance their performance on the playing field.....good Lord! What kind of messages are we sending to our kids?

We also live in a culture that barrages us with media images.....and, in my opinion, has about the attention span of a six-year-old on a sugar high (I speak here with experience)! The shocking, graphic and disturbing images of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto just three weeks ago have been swept away and replaced now with the compelling question, “what in the world has happened to Brittany Spears.....has she lost her mind?will she lose custody of her kids?.....more in the next segment! Or, Drew Peterson is back in the news this week.....his wife, Stacy, bless her heart, would be celebrating her 23rd birthday today.....that is, if she is still alive.....new details to follow.” Stay tuned folks.....this is a culture that, I believe, robs us of our dignity, our integrity, our dreams, our best selves.

“Come and See!”

In the gospel story this morning, John the Baptist points the crowd and his own disciples to Jesus, saying, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” The very next day after this bold pronouncement, John repeated it again and two of his disciples in fact, “followed” Jesus. One of the two men was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.....and after spending just one day in the company of Jesus, he went directly to his brother and exclaimed, “We have found the Messiah.” Thus, a movement was born.....Jesus had attracted his first disciples!

I wonder, what must that have felt like.....to be pulled into the orbit of this mysterious young preacher, teacher, and healer? Here they were, Simon and Andrew, fishermen by trade, in the same place where they spent most of their days, doing the things that took up most of their waking hours, casting their nets into the Sea of Galilee and hoping for a good catch! No doubt they expected that the next day would be much the same, and the day after that and many more days and weeks and years. These folks didn’t have much.....they were poor, they had to work hard to make a living for themselves and their families. No doubt they were good Jews, they observed the Sabbath and listened to the proclamation of Scripture; they spent time with their families and friends. But mostly, they fished!

And along came this man, Jesus, passing along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. And what was he doing, exactly? “Proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.” If we can guess by the response of Andrew, then Simon, then the others, the power of Jesus’ proclamation must have been overwhelming. “Follow me,” he said to Simon and Andrew – and immediately they left their nets and followed him.....then he called James and John, and they left their father, Zebedee, stranded in a boat with the hired help, and followed Jesus. They all followed Jesus, apparently without a backward glance.

When I hear this story, I always pause and worry if I have what it takes to be a disciple.....could you do it? If a clear call was to come to you tomorrow afternoon, could you get up from your chair and walk out the door, without taking your keys or turning out the lights? Could you abandon your grocery cart in the produce section of Sunset or the Jewel and take off without calling home? Think about it! That’s more or less what the first disciples did.....someone they had never seen in their lives commanded them to, “Follow me,” and they did, leaving their families, their jobs, their homes behind to follow Jesus.

I don’t know about you, but I always tend to give Simon, Andrew, and the other disciples all the credit for their discipleship. After all, what strength, what courage, what faith they must have had to do what they did, sacrificing everything to go after Jesus! What heroes they were! To the contrary.....according

to the gospels of John, Matthew and Mark, there was nothing hard about it at all.....Jesus called and they followed.....end of discussion. They did not know him. They were not waiting for him. If the truth were known, they might have described themselves as observant Jews, religious types, but they took one look at Jesus and that was that.....no second guesses no backward glances. They just dropped what was in their hands and went after him.

But on second thought, I'm thinking this is a miracle story, not a hero story.....as full of God's power as the feeding of the five thousand or the raising up of the dead. I'm thinking that this isn't a story about the power of human beings to change their lives, to leave everything behind and follow.....this is a story about the power of God.....to walk right up to a bunch of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none just the moment before.

This is not a story about us.....this is a story about God's ability not only to call us but also to create in us the ability to follow and to love Jesus.....able to follow because we can't do otherwise.....because he interests us more than anything else in our lives.....because he seems to know what we hunger for.....and because he seems also to be the food.....the bread of life!

Tomorrow we commemorate the life of perhaps the most famous modern-day disciple of our time.....the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Here was a man who heard Jesus say, "Come and see," a man who rolled up his sleeves and changed the course of history. Dr. King had a "dream" and out of that dream he formed a movement that culminated in both civil rights and voting rights legislation for people of color.....overturning centuries of discrimination, hatred, and violence. I wonder.....if Martin were here today.....what new dreams might he have?

Jesus drew alongside the first disciples, drew alongside MLK, and he draws alongside us each and every day, beckoning to us to "Come and See!"

I don't know about you, but I think I'll take my chances with the itinerant fishermen in this story.....this awesome, reckless person who came sweeping into their lives, has made the statement, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). I believe it.....how about you? I'm ready to follow. I will pray for those two young men in Palestine who believe they are following Allah, preparing to kill others and themselves in the name of God. I will pray that they will see that death is not what God or Allah seeks, but the fullness of life.....peace and justice for all people.....the end of war, terror and destruction.....the end of oppression and degradation for many of the peoples around the world. I will also pray without ceasing for our candidates and for our country, that we might have both prosperity and justice, security and freedom, peace and hope. It is also my prayer this morning that we can learn to be counter-cultural, and in doing so, we can take back what is best about us.....our families, our communities, our nation, and our world. I ask that God be with all of us in the days ahead, to guard and guide us, and to love us unconditionally, whatever our path.

I will also pray that we never forget that this is not a story about us.....this is a story about God. Let's pray that we allow ourselves to fall in love, to leave our old lives behind without a heavy heart.....with our minds not on what we're leaving, but on where we're going.....and with whom.....we want to be ready when we hear the words, "Come and See!"

Amen