

READINGS

Isaiah 9:1-4

Matthew 4:12-23

Can You Hear Me Now?

“Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?” Unlike the unrealistic guarantee of particular cell phone company the season of epiphany reminds us that we can connect with God’s presence anywhere, anytime, no matter what the circumstance. Even in the darkness God’s light shines. Even in the midst of our mundane ordinary lives God calls us.

It was Dianne Bergant who first suggested “Can you hear me now?” sounds a bit much like a vocational summoning in which God calls us. God asks “Can you hear me now?” And much like the Verizon guy God is showing up everywhere asking that question.¹ Asking can you hear me, or do you see me, or feel me, or do you notice me.

In today’s gospel we recognize the call to discipleship of four fishermen. Jesus invites them to journey with him in a new vocation. “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” It always startles me a little in the scriptures how quickly and completely people reacted to Jesus. Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John left their nets and followed Jesus. They not only left their trade (the only thing they likely knew) but James and John left their father mending the nets on his own. “In a patriarchal society, the father-son relationship is one of the most intimate bonds.”² These men left behind their family responsibilities and most likely the family business to follow this new prophet. Now I imagine that caused quite a stir along the shoreline of Galilee.

¹ Bergant, Diane January 17,2005 http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=3973

² IBID

But these men heard the call and their lives transformed from catching fish to catching people so that the people of Galilee might experience light in the darkness, and healing and hope in a world of struggles. The call of these disciples is quite radical. Few of us are called to make such drastic life changes when we recognize God's voice, but we are all called to something new. We are all called to an Epiphany. A change of perspective.

We may be called to recognize God's presence where we have seen it before or we may be called to live out God's presence for others in a way we have not done before. "Most of us are expected to answer the call and remain where we are, doing what we do, but now with a view to proclaiming explicitly with our lives the Gospel of the reign of God." Proclaiming as Jesus did the kingdom of God is near.

Ben Helmer reminds us "Proclaiming the Good News is not something left only to individual evangelists; it is in fact the task of *(all Christians)*. Yet, we are often led to believe and act as though only individuals can tell the story of Jesus. Epiphany is a season about proclamation and the power of God at work in God's people, to be sure; but it is also a season when the church examines its life and witness and how it understands itself to be the incarnated Christ planted in a local community."³ With Jesus and Isaiah we are called to proclaim light in the deep darkness.

I recall taking a course in seminary on transforming congregations and missional churches. I took this course because I felt that was where the spirit was leading me as a minister. It struck me this week, how easy it is to forget our call. Like it happens in many profession we as ministers often find ourselves connecting with a vocation, vision and mission in our studies but when we get out of the classroom and hit the ground running we fall into a pattern of just trying to stay afloat in our daily lives. Congregational, pastoral ministry becomes about maintenance rather than vision, call and proclamation. We can forget as Christians and churches that our soul purpose is not to survive - but to live and offer life to others as we share the good news.

³ Helmer, Ben Jan 23, 2011 www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_126416_ENG_HTM.htm

I have heard many stories of churches living out their mission and call. As I was reading this week I found an article by Helmer where he shares some examples of light in the darkness. “In a small tourist town in the mid-South it is now winter; unemployment is high and there’s not much money in anyone’s pocket. A church decides to offer Sunday night suppers for the community, and local restaurateurs offer to prepare the food – all donated. As one chef said, “This is why I go to church,” and he and his fellow chefs generously donate good food each week to feed anyone who shows up between 4 and 6 p.m.

This is the light that shines in a land of deep darkness, and it is part of the gospel of Jesus, part of the Good News for folks who are living in the gloom of unemployment and the dark and cold of winter.

In another community, a church offers income-tax assistance to the elderly at no charge; still another decides to help people with special needs to pay their monthly bills and combines bill-paying times with a meal at the church.

These are tasks that can’t be done by individuals, but a congregation can easily develop a significant ministry of light that makes a difference.

Epiphany is a time of recognition; the recognition that Jesus Christ is present, “incarnate” as we church folks sometimes say, born into the world, made flesh, affirming our humanity. That’s the main theme of Epiphany.”⁴

Dennis Jacobsen wrote “*Our* commission has nothing to do with church growth. The primary concern of the church in the public arena is not to find more members to fill the pews of the sanctuary. The church is sent into the public arena with the ethical imperatives of Jesus. The church is to proclaim the kingdom of God over against the kingdoms of the world. The church is to make disciples who actually live by and observe the teachings of its Lord....Bonhoeffer wrote, “The church is the church only when it exists for others.”⁵

God calls us as human beings to be in partnership with Christ. God calls us unlikely characters just as he calls the unlikely characters of Peter, Andrew, James and John. Our commission is to follow the way of Jesus, live the way of love for all the world - but as a congregation we are especially called to this little community of Squamish.

I have had a few conversations and emails in the last weeks asking how do we reach others? I have heard people asking about our youth and young adults. I have wondered with people how can we keep those folks who show up on Christmas eve coming back? We have a vision and a mission for a legacy that cares for the community. I admit that one of the things I love about the mission of our building project is that to me it speaks to the purpose of church which is offer light in the darkness. We have the opportunity to help this community in ways we can not

⁴ IBID

⁵ Jacobsen, Dennis “Doing Justice (Congregations and Community Organizing) ©2001 pg. 14-15

imagine. But we are also being called in this time of Epiphany, in this season of a new year to remember our mission “to be an inclusive community serving God’s world.” Our desire for growth must be about more than filling our pews so that we can make more money. Our desire for growth must be about serving God’s people and world. Our desire for youth and young families must not be about keeping us alive it must be because we want to proclaim our belief that God’s kingdom is here for us to live in light and love. Our desire to be recognized within the community of Squamish must be because we want to live love and life and light so extremely that we can’t help but proclaim it.

We have a dream and a vision. We have a mission and goals. “Can you hear me now?” God is calling. We are being called to recognize our mission and vision. Are we listening to the moving of the spirit? Are we responding to the call? “Is our church a place where people can discover their call? Are there ministries in which everyone can participate? (*are participating where God is calling us?*) Is our church multi-dimensional: inward and spiritual, outward and mission-focused, focused on the ones yet to come rather than only on those who are already in the fellowship? Creating a place for new people is often creating a place for people to be called, just like the chef who discovered he could use his talents on Sunday nights to cook food for others.

Helmer summed up what I see as a true church experience this way. “Epiphany is often a time for annual parish meetings. These meetings are frequently dreaded by clergy, endured by laity, and concluded with a feast of relief. The lessons for today are a forceful reminder that these meetings ought to be times when the church takes council for mission. They should never be times of complaint or hand-wringing over budget deficits. The community can benefit from being recalled to its mission, just as though it were Jesus coming by and saying, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

That call should be at the center of everything we do, every time we meet. When the call to follow Jesus is the agenda, then we will discover that we too can be a place where people discover and experience the Good news of Christ. Amen