

Isaiah 49: 1-7
John 1: 29-42
January 19, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

I am guessing that if I took a poll about who was the greatest evangelist in the New Testament most people would say the apostle Paul. Paul traveled all over the eastern Mediterranean. Tradition holds that he went as far west as Spain. His witness to soldiers while in prison spread the gospel to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire. His career evangelism statistics have earned him a permanent place in the Christian hall of fame.

Yet my candidate is not Paul. It is John the Baptist. Without John there would be no Paul. It is John who believed that there was a messiah coming before Jesus appeared on the scene. It is John who prepares himself so that he will recognize the messiah when he comes. It is John who gathers and trains a community of disciples who will be equipped also to recognize this messiah when he appears. It is John who invites the multitude of the people of Israel to wake up and prepare their hearts to recognize and acknowledge the one sent by God to restore Israel.

John the Baptist represents the fruition of Israel's hope. He is the link between the history of the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Jacob, the God of the prophets and the time of the revealing of the Christ. John does not appear out of nowhere. His voice comes from deep within heart of God's people. Those who fail to appreciate the continuity of the Old Testament with the New cannot understand the deep significance of John the Baptist and the unique way he brings forward the treasure of Israel's faith to prepare a people to recognize God's fulfillment of the promise.

Thus it is that we are meant to hear in John's preaching the echoes of the prophet

Isaiah:

Listen to me, O coastlands! Pay attention you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born. While I was in my mother's womb
He named me. And now the Lord who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him, that Israel might be gathered to him...he says
I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to
the end of the earth.

From the perspective of the writers of the New Testament when John speaks it is not just an individual's voice: it is the voice of the prophets of Israel. Unless we seek to understand the deep and historical hope of Israel we cannot appreciate John's ministry.

The next reason why I nominate John the Baptist and the greatest of the evangelists is this: John does not tell people what they must believe and how they must believe it. He calls them to turn away from lives that cannot recognize or receive the messiah. John's ministry is to awaken the long slumbering expectation that there really is a messiah and he really has come into the world. He wishes to inspire people to clear the decks of blinds them to what God is doing. But having done this, John must trust that people will have their own encounter with the messiah. They will come to believe based on their own experience. I need not tell you that this is the only way that real spiritual experience happens. I did not experience Jesus as my Lord and Savior because I believed what someone else told me. Their witness prepared my heart to recognize him for myself. It is why I am not interested if you can recite scripture all night. I am not with how many books you have read or teachings you have listened to. I am interested in whether or not you have experienced the grace of God revealed and offered in Jesus.

This is why what happens in the passage in this morning's gospel reading is so important and powerful.

John the Baptist is at his place by the river and he sees Jesus walking by. He points Jesus out to his disciples, "Look! There he is, the Lamb of God!" What happens? Two of his disciples on hearing John's words and seeing the one John is pointing to, leave John and go to follow Jesus. John has given these disciples the gift of curiosity. He has awakened in them the inner yearning that there is a messiah coming into the world and that perhaps Jesus is the One. John has not sold them on a set of rules and doctrines. He has awakened them to seek a person in whom they hope to find the presence of God. Friends, this is the greatest work of Christian Education; not to indoctrinate people into the faith but to prepare them to be open to hearing the gospel for themselves in their own lives and to begin a life's journey of following Jesus one day at a time.

And then comes the best part of the story! The two disciples follow Jesus. Becoming aware that he is being followed Jesus turns and asks them, "What are you looking for?" Interesting way of putting the question! Not, "who are you looking for?" but "*what* are you looking for?" This is a tough question! Who of us could answer such a question on the spot! The difficulty lies in the fact that we cannot put into words why we are following Jesus. Like the disciples we can't say in any meaningful way what we want from Jesus. Our yearnings lie too deep for mere words. And so we move through life following this figure often not really knowing why. We are often embarrassed when someone asks us why we do weird things like go to church on Sunday, pray, read the Bible, play music and all the other things communities like this do. And yet we do. When push comes to shove perhaps it is as simple as the fact that life seems more meaningful following this teacher.

It is no surprise then that when confronted with this abrupt and overwhelming question the disciples give what seems like an awkward answer: “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Jesus does not belittle the question. In fact, though they do not know it, they have asked a very deep and true question: Where does the savior live? Where does he abide? Where can we *find* him?

As he often does, Jesus responds to this deeper question. He does not say, “O, just down the road at Martha’s house.” Instead he says, “Come and see.” Come, follow me and see for yourselves where I am staying. Then the scripture says that they went and saw where he lived; and then, significantly, they remained with him that day.

Is it beating a pin with a sledge hammer to make the point that the heart of Christian life has nothing to do with believing all the right things and living according to certain rules? It has everything with an open and curious heart which is always responding to the savior’s invitation to walk with him, see what he sees, love who he loves and grow in the journey?

Is it about the change that take place when we trust him to lead us where we cannot see and to become by grace the people we never knew we could become?

Indeed, doesn’t this simplify our own confusion and insecurities when it comes to sharing the gospel! For now we no longer have to convince someone to our way of believing. We have only to continue our walk with Jesus. And when someone wonders where we find Jesus, we have only to share our experience and to invite that person to “come and see! Amen.