

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for The Second Sunday After the Epiphany
January 16, 2011
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A strong line runs through our readings today, like a rope that draws us to the realization that God calls us. We are pulled into the light of Epiphany and pray that this light will assist us in understanding the meaning of our call.

In the lesson from the Hebrew scriptures, we immerse ourselves into the stunning poetry and metaphors of the Second Servant Song. This part of Isaiah is from near the end of the Babylonian captivity, when the prophet is filled with hope for the redeemed Israel of God, the servant of the Holy One. He compares the nation that was unfaithful before the exile to the new nation that has learned its lesson and is redeemed by the grace of God and the faithfulness of God.

What is vividly manifest to us and to those who first heard these words is the conviction of the prophet that the ones who are called by God are known by him from the beginning of time. This is what the words “who has formed me in the womb to be his servant” mean. God, who knows no past or future, who lives in the eternal now, knows us before we are even formed and calls us to be his people. But even that is not enough, God reveals more to the prophet. The call of God is to be more than servants. We are called to be a light to the nations. We as a people, a nation, a community. The call is not simply to individuals. When God calls, the call is always into the life of the People of God. We are not called or Baptized into isolation or into individualism. We are called to responsible living within the people whom God sends to be a light to the nations.

So, as we bask in the wonder of being chosen, we are confronted with the enormous burden that comes with the call: to be a light to the nations, so that God’s salvation may reach to the end of the earth. Even to the people of Israel, who thought that they only were the chosen nation, God makes it clear that salvation is not something to be hoarded selfishly but is given only that it may be shared with everyone.

For St. Paul, the called of God receive the riches of the Spirit: speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts. For Paul, this calling makes us blameless before God at the end of time, because we have been called into fellowship with Jesus Christ the Son of God. And once we are in fellowship, how can we become estranged?

How does this calling come about? The writer of John’s gospel gives us some vivid pictures of the call as it came to the first followers of Jesus.

We have been looking at John the Baptizer from various viewpoints since the beginning of Advent. John the fiery is also John the humble. It took huge humility for John – who was sure of his own calling – to recognize that he was not the one who would save the people of God. John’s call was to point to another. “I told you he was coming,” he says in effect to his disciples. “He ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” This is a consistent theme in the Gospel of John: that Jesus has existed with God from the beginning. The Baptist tells his disciples that this truth was revealed to him at the baptism of Jesus by the Holy Spirit; that the testimony about the role of Jesus came to him from God through the Spirit of God.

We find John in this reading standing on a hill near the banks of the Jordan, flanked by his disciples and telling them, “See the one who is passing by? He is the one you should be following, because he is the Lamb of God.” Two of John’s disciples don’t hesitate. They leave John and run after Jesus.

Jesus hears them and turns toward them. “What are you looking for?” he asks. It’s an interesting question. He already knows they are following him. But what are they looking for from him? They don’t know yet. They are attracted by what John has told them, by his reference to Jesus as the Lamb of God, which reminds them of the Exodus and of Isaiah’s words of personal sacrifice. They show the desire to learn. So they ask Jesus, “Where are you staying?” And Jesus offers them the concise call to those who seek: “Come and see.” They must have spent hours asking questions, listening. “They remained with him that day,” the gospel writer tells us.

For one of them at least, Andrew the fisherman, the day resulted in a passion for sharing the good news. By four o’clock in the afternoon there was no question left in Andrew’s mind that “this is the Messiah, the Anointed of God.” He runs to his beloved brother Simon and brings him to Jesus. The called becomes the caller. He becomes the light leading his brother to the Light of the world. And Jesus immediately calls Simon by his new name, “Peter.” When we are called we are changed and afterward we cannot, we must not, keep the knowledge to ourselves. We must share it with others for the salvation of the world.

We hear this call against the backdrop of a week of reflection and commentary on the tragic shootings in Tucson. Whatever may be said about the factors that influenced the shooter, it is abundantly clear to me that this tragic incident is a reminder that the Message entrusted to us still needs messengers. It saddened me during the week to see Christian friends defending partisans and downplaying the impact of polarizing rhetoric from both ends of the socio-political spectrum. What if instead they had turned off the “autopilot” switch and pointed to the Savior who is trying to lead us to a new and better way of living with one another. I was even accused of suggesting that people should be silenced. That’s the last thing I want. But I do want us to become conscious of how our words and tone influence others. I speak as the chief of sinners when I tell you, we have to stop using violent images and calling names and labeling people with whom we disagree. I suggest to you that the next time you are tempted to call someone a “lib” or a “right-winger” you ask yourself if that is any more appropriate than using an ethnic slur. What if pegging someone with a denigrating political label became as unpopular as telling a racist joke. Are we guided by our biases and the biases of our political handlers more than we are guided by the Lamb of God? If you are following him, what is it that you want from him? Are you following him as Sovereign Lord of your life? Such a relationship entails responsibility – to be a light to the nations, starting with our own.

We are also mindful that tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day. We have a tendency to romanticize Dr. King’s call and turn down the rheostat on the light he brought to the social, political, ethical, and spiritual illness of this nation – not just the illness of racism, but of war and poverty and oppression in general. He was not assassinated because everybody liked what he had to say. He was assassinated because he sought the truth and pricked our conscience and made us uncomfortable. He accepted the responsibility that came with his vocation. Did you know that his last sermon was preached in an Episcopal Church on the Sunday before his death? He delivered that sermon from the pulpit of the Washington National Cathedral and in it he called the Congress and the President to accountability for their actions. You can read it online. I am posting a link to it on e-piphanies.com. I suggest that instead of getting caught up in the sentimentalities of tomorrow’s observance, when we pat ourselves on the back for all the progress that we imagine has been achieved, you read that sermon and search your own conscience in its light.

May the light of the Epiphany lead us to the glory and to the responsibility of being called by Jesus Christ.