

Not All Epiphanies Are Sky Openers John 1:29-42

I like suspense movies in which one unexpected development follows another. That is why the Bible fascinates me. Just as soon as you draw some conclusion based on your reading of it, it hits you between the eyes with a new development.

We are in the church season of Epiphany. The word means “revelation,” and the texts that have been traditionally read by the church show God in self-revelation. Acts such as the creation of the world, the giving of the law, the birth, the baptism, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus are accompanied by voices from heaven and the powerful presence of the Spirit.

We feel ourselves being urged by the biblical writers to plug into these exceptional events, and we begin to anticipate that a response to this urging will result in some experience in our own lives. We remember Paul and his sky-opening experience on the road to Damascus. We remember Jacob and his ladder and his sky-opening experience at Bethel. We begin to conclude that the test of whether we have really heard and believed what the Bible says is whether we have some comparable experience.

The Gospel text for this Second Sunday after Epiphany, however, is “a new Development.” Look at it. Two disciples of John the Baptist, one of whom is Andrew, are standing with John, when Jesus walks by. “That is the Lamb of God,” John says. And then again in the third paragraph John again says, “Look, here is the Lamb of God.” Intrigued, the two disciples decide to follow along with Jesus; but they do not have any conviction about Jesus. Jesus asks them what they are looking for. They respond by saying, “We just thought we would go see where you are staying.” It was almost as though they did not have anything better to do with the afternoon, so they thought they might as well see what a few hours with Jesus would bring them.

When I was a teenager, I went to my Sunday evening youth group meetings because there were some neat girls there and because we often did fun things and because it was better than sitting at home. It was not because I was on fire with religious zeal. It is only in retrospect that I can see what an important thing God was doing with me as I followed without conviction.

I wonder how many people here got their start in adult discipleship, not because they just could not wait to get up on cold Sunday mornings and go to church, but because they just had this feeling that participation in the church would be a good thing for their children and their marriages and families. There are many people who followed at first without conviction.

So, maybe you are here today because many years ago your parents didn't give you any choice. Or maybe you are here today because it was easier to come than to argue with your spouse about it. Or maybe you are here for no particular reason. If you fit into one of those slots or into some similar slot, I hope you don't feel guilty about that. The Bible introduces us to many people who followed first without conviction.

Sometimes God starts his work with us before we follow at all. William Muehl went to law school where he excelled in moot court. Unfortunately, the stress of doing so gave him an ulcer. After three gastric episodes that required medical treatment, his doctor made a prediction. "William," he said, "If you really undertake a career in the law, you will probably be rich by the age of forty. The only trouble is that you will be dead by the age of thirty." Hearing that, Muehl left law school and went to Yale Divinity School where he flourished healthily and where he came to realize, he had been led by God.

A student contemporary of mine at seminary had the just the opposite experience, leaving seminary to see if medical school was what God had in mind for him. It was. God had called him into the medical field.

Elijah, in the Old Testament, waited at the mouth of a cave in the wilderness for God to reveal himself. There was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. There was wind, but God was not in the wind. There was fire, but God was not in the fire. And then, there was a still small voice. Not all epiphanies are sky-openers.

The disciples who first followed without conviction, however, remained with growing interest. They arrived with Jesus at the place where he was staying; and, in view of the fact that it was late, “they stayed with him that day.” They “stayed” with him. They “abode” with him. They “remained” with him. The mind leaps ahead to a late point in Jesus’ ministry, and we hear Jesus saying to his disciples, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me (stays with me, remains with me), he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Too many of us follow Christ without conviction to some abiding place from which we depart prematurely, before Jesus has brought forth fruit in us. Barry first started attending church to please his wife. Before long, the church’s program for international students in the city caught his interest. Next, he began to give some moral and financial support to that program. Before the lord was through with him, Barry was heading up the whole mission program of the congregation....and wondering with a not-so-serious shake of his head why he had ever let himself get started in this in the first place! In truth, by abiding in the place he has first entered without conviction, he had discovered a whole new dimension of meaning, purpose and satisfaction in his life as a Christian.

The moral here is that you do well not to draw hasty conclusions about the place to which God seems to have brought you. You do well to abide there with mind, heart and hands responsive to the opportunities in that place. You may discover that a place that felt at first like exile has, in fact, become home.

Young Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. His purchasers took him down to Egypt. Without any conviction that his life could amount to anything, Joseph decided to bloom where he was planted. You know the story. He became the highest ranking official in Egypt next to Pharaoh and turned out to be God's agent for the world to survive the great 7-year drought. To his brothers Joseph said, "You meant it to me for evil, but God meant it to me for good." By abiding in the place to which he had come without conviction, Joseph bore in his life the fruit that God had in mind for him.

In today's reading ----Andrew first followed Jesus without conviction. He remains with Jesus with growing interest. Finally, he discovers and begins to carry out a new vocation. "One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon...and brought him to Jesus."

There once was a woman who began her journey in faith because she loved to sing. To put it more bluntly, she loved to sing in front of other people, and she warmed to the lavish compliments and enthusiastic responses generated by her lovely voice. The local church choir was not exactly show business, but it was as close to that as she could come, so she sang there. The rest of the worship Service was of no interest to her, and she would often secretly read a paperback novel in the choir loft, awaiting her chance to perform.

Then somehow, the words of the solos and the anthems began to have a certain power for her.

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,” and “I know that my Redeemer lives,” began to speak to her beyond the concerns of musical phrasing and pitch. She was gradually acquiring not only an acquaintance with the vocabulary of the faith, but also a relationship to the One to whom those words point. Now, when she sings, she does so with a new name. She is no longer “performer.” She is “Witness.”

If you follow Christ home and stay with him and with his family, the church, the other disciples who have followed him home, you will not ever become anything more than a sinner saved by grace. You will still sing, in part, because you like the sound of your own voice, and you will still lapse into reading paperbacks, when you ought to be intent on other things. But you will grow.

The Spirit and the values and the lifestyle of the kingdom of God will begin to be reflected in your spirit and your values and your lifestyle. You will realize more and more that you are not your own, that you belong to God who has called you to himself in Christ; and you will begin to know that hearing and responding to that call is life’s highest opportunity and life’s deepest joy.

Let us all allow the Spirit of Christ to fill our own spirits so that the words of Christ will grow and bear much fruit.

Amen!