

Year A, 3rd after Epiphany

Psalm 27:1, 5-13

Isaiah 9:1-4

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

St. John's, Bangor

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January 22, 2017

In the Black Hills of South Dakota, there is a cave called Wind Cave. Wind Cave is a sacred site for the Oglala and Hunkpapa, two of the councils of the Lakota, the people called "the Sioux" by French fur traders. The Lakota believe that Wind Cave is the place where the world was born. Wakan Tanka, as God is called in the Lakota language, created the world and its inhabitants at Wind Cave. It is a place of light and darkness, of birth and death, it is, for the People, the Lakota, a place that points to God.

Wind Cave is now considered the property of the National Park Service, and one can take tours of this fascinating place. One enters now through a doorway in the hillside and descends long staircases lit by artificial light. One goes down nearly three hundred steps and then there is a walk of about a quarter of a mile in this dimly lit cave. Once stopped on the floor of the cave, deep in the earth, the Park Ranger who led the tour has everyone quietly stand still. The Ranger then turns off all the lights.

I had never seen darkness like that. Even with my hand resting at the end of my nose, I could not see my fingers. Nothing. It was completely dark. It wasn't long before I felt closed in and a little frightened.

After a bit, the Ranger had people close their eyes, and he turned on the lights. The lights, which before I had thought were dim, now seemed very bright. He explained that they didn't leave the lights off very long, because people would begin to fall over after a few minutes, having lost their points of reference.

This is what life is like without Christ. Darkness that is frightening. Life that closes in on us, feeling like death's shadow. Without God, there is no reference point. We stumble and fall, hurting ourselves and others, trying to cope with the dark. This is the darkness that has enshrouded the world since the fall.

This is the darkness that Jesus dispels. When Jesus came, and preached and taught, the people had never heard anything like it. Simon and Andrew, James and John left their nets to follow Jesus. Light illumined the early disciples' hearts and lives. They had a reference point. They could see which way to go. When they searched the scriptures, they found Isaiah telling them a light would dawn in Galilee. As the early Christians studied and interpreted Isaiah, they saw Jesus as that light.

Originally written after the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Isaiah in our passage today looks forward to a time when Zebulun and Naphtali would be freed by the Lord, to a time when the people would respond to the Lord with joy, having had their yoke of oppression broken by the Lord. As Jesus proclaimed God's release through his teaching of the Kingdom and his ministry of healing, the people responded in joy. After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus continued to proclaim John's rallying cry, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!"

So often we hear the word "repent" and we conclude that it means something about sorrow for our sin. Certainly, when we recognize the darkness in our lives, there can be sorrow. But to

repent literally means “to change one’s direction.” Sometimes that includes remorse and sorrow, but oftentimes repentance and changing one’s direction means joy.

When these first four disciples responded to Jesus’ call, they repented. They turned from fishing and went in the direction of Jesus, following him. Jesus had been growing famous because of his teaching and healing and these fishermen were aware of that. Capernaum was a pretty small village and, even if Andrew, Simon and the Zebedee boys weren’t “synagogue-going” men, they had heard of Jesus. Enough so that when Jesus called they were eager to go. This is what repentance looks like: a change in direction and eager following.

Discipleship isn’t defined by admiration or belief, it is defined by following Jesus. Discipleship means being with Jesus. Discipleship means forming a community with Jesus that lives by the standards that Jesus sets. Discipleship means valuing the people Jesus values. Discipleship means embracing the life, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus as the defining principles that guide our lives. Discipleship means changing our direction to embrace all that Jesus is. Discipleship means going in the direction Jesus goes.

The Corinthian church was having a hard time with discipleship. They were forming groups based on who was baptized by whom; they were arguing about superiority. It was a gang mentality based on jealousy and quarreling. Our Epistle lesson today is Paul’s call for a change in direction: they were to be of one mind focusing on the message of the cross. It is in this embrace of Christ crucified and the unity of community found in Christ that the Corinthian Christians would find real power.

When John was arrested, Jesus moved from Nazareth near Samaria to Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee and made his home there. In that geographical change of location, the words of Isaiah took on new meaning: the people would sit in darkness and the shadow of death no longer, for the light God promised dawned in Jesus. As Jesus took up John’s call to repentance and the proclamation of God’s kingdom, he called to himself others who would become followers, disciples of Jesus because they found in Jesus a light that put their lives and priorities into perspective.

When we think of the light that dawned in Galilee, we often think of a mesmerizing or metaphorical light that we gaze at, a light to which we are drawn. However, the light of Christ is shed abroad over the landscape of our lives and in that light, we see from horizon to horizon how distorted our world is by division, the quest for power, jealousy and greed. In the light of Christ, we find our reference point. In the light, we see the endless possibilities for community, healing, inclusion and generosity, if only we will change direction and follow Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, “Discipleship is not an offer one (man) makes to Christ. It is only the call which creates the situation.” Discipleship is not something we offer to do ourselves; discipleship is when, like Andrew and Simon, James and John, we hear the call of Christ Jesus deep inside and choose to change direction in our lives and follow Christ Jesus only.

Indeed, it is Christ who finds us today on the seashore, tending the nets of our lives. We hear the call of Christ. We look up and notice the world looks different in the dawning light. The call to discipleship is unmistakable. Christ Jesus is calling each one of us. We can follow Christ Jesus, joining with him in proclaiming the Kingdom of light here and now or we can remain in the shadow of death. The choice to follow is ours. Dear brothers and sisters, Christ Jesus is calling you.