



Second Sunday After Epiphany, Lectionary 2, Year A

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Gospel Text - John 1:29-42*

John 1:29-42

²⁹ [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One."

³⁵ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first

found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). ⁴² He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

SERMON TEXT:

Grace and mercy to you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, here we are, a few moments from the beginning of the year...how are those New Year's Resolutions going? Many of us start the year with great intentions! We envision big changes, we hope for something new, we take strides to change habits or start new ones. Why do we do this? If you've ever talked to anyone who has made a resolution or set new goals, it usually revolves around some dissatisfaction in one's life, or workplace, with one's body or with one's relationships, and the new focus, habits or actions are crafted in hopes of changing things and making things better in the months to come or the year ahead. In your experience, do you or anyone you know ever "get there?" Do you ever make it to the fulness of change and complete satisfaction? Certainly, I believe in hope and I have seen people make real strides towards health and wholeness in self and relationships, but too often I hear the defeat, the questioning, and the giving up when life hits us. We might get overly busy, or we get too distracted, and we even lose a little of the hope that we started with. We live in and with imperfection.

In today's readings from the Old Testament lesson in Isaiah chapter 49, to Psalm 40, to the 1 Corinthians chapter 1 lesson, and finally to our Gospel reading from the book of John, chapter 1, each and every one of these readings hold some amazing call story, a calling from God to the merely human characters God works through to do and to be God's most helpful, yes imperfect, but most amazing instruments of grace, mercy and peace to the world. Their call is life-changing, it is world-changing because they simply point to Jesus as The One, whose life, death and resurrection, can and does actually make a difference in experience, in life and in love, through forgiveness and grace.

Isaiah states that "The Lord called me before I was born; while I was still in my mother's womb, he named me." And then goes on to prophesy of Jesus' coming so that God's "salvation may reach to the end of the earth." That's BIG! 800 years before Jesus lived, Isaiah prophesied his importance to the ends of the earth!

In the Psalm, David talks about having been in a "desolate pit," and that God "set my feet upon a high cliff, making my footing sure" thus giving him hope so deep that he responds, "I love to do your will, Oh God"..."I have spoken of your faithfulness and your deliverance." As imperfect as he was, David's devotion and acknowledgement of God's redemption is poignant, it is life changing.

And then in I Corinthians the apostle Paul states, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord." You can't get plainer or more poignant than that! He was called, WE are called to be *partners* in sharing the light and love of Jesus.

And then in our Gospel today, John the Baptist blatantly identifies Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the world!" Several times John calls Jesus out and testifies to his holiness and purpose. And then Andrew and his brother Simon respond by following Jesus. And I'm sure you realize this is Simon, who Jesus renames Peter (the rock on whom he builds his church), who then also denies him three times. Think on that imperfection for a moment.

But, more importantly for today, did you catch how Jesus catches the disciple's attention? The question he asks them was this: "What are you looking for?"

Listen as I ask it again...WHAT are you looking for? What ARE you looking for? What are YOU looking for? What are you LOOKING FOR?

These various intonations slightly change that focus of the question, don't they? Which one resonates with you?

It's interesting that the disciples actually don't ever really answer the question. I can only imagine being their shoes with this holy rabbi/teacher asking such a big question. It is big, isn't it? Can you answer it? What are you looking for?

In some ways, our whole life here on earth is about looking for something much bigger than ourselves. Although we're in a different place than those disciples were at this point in their experience with Jesus, we already KNOW the end of the story, they didn't. We know who Jesus is and what his life, death, and resurrection mean for us, what they mean for all humanity, for all creation to the ends of the earth...yet our human tendencies often shift our gaze away from our focus on Jesus. Sometimes our difficult life experiences shift our hope and faith to despair and hopelessness; and in many ways it is the human condition. It is our condition to ebb and flow, to grow and prune, to "get it" and then "miss it," to be "in the zone" and then fall out of it. On this side of heaven, we're not in glory yet, so we can't be fulfilled in the way we yearn to be completely filled.

So, what do we do? Another way for us to ask Jesus' question might be: What kind of HOPE do you long for in uncertain times? Why this question? We have talked about the importance of hope in our desire for change. Hope is vitally important to our life of faith and our ability to focus on Jesus, but it is also vital in order for us to make real change in our lives. We've talked about the reality of our yearning for something bigger than ourselves;

“yearning” and “longing for” are synonymous. And of course, it is not hard to realize we are living in uncertain times. Why not name it?

So, we ask the question: What kind of HOPE do you long for in uncertain times?

There is an acronym, offered by Pastor Beth Giller, a pastor in East Toledo, that might be really helpful as we search out the meaning of this lesson and the answer to this question.

The acronym is HOPE, and each letter stands for a word that has meaning that helps us think about the kind of HOPE we want to hold on to in difficult times, and, what God’s action is, as God provides us hope as we live our daily lives.

So here it is, HOPE that we can hold onto in uncertain times:

H - History: when times are tough, think back on times when God showed up and when you look back on previous experiences you know God was there with and for you. Sometimes we just need that reminder. So, H is for history

O - Obedience: God has shown up for humanity over the course of history, so reading scripture and seeing how God was present and shepherded the people of the Old and New Testament when they were obedient can be helpful and calming for us. And then,

remembering our own experiences of following God's will, especially when we're at a crossroad or making hard decisions, that is important. O, for obedience in challenging times.

P - Perseverance: both scripture and experience tell us that perseverance in tough times is key to faithful and hopeful living. Romans 5:3-5 tells us that hard stuff like suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character and character produces hope. Staying with it gets us to hope! Isn't that interesting? P, for perseverance.

E - Expectation: You can always expect to be surprised by this amazing God who loves us so deeply and expansively. You've heard the quip "God works in mysterious ways." Our God is so mind-boggling big and good and gracious, that the most faithful response to hard times is to know that God is with us through it all; and that ultimately, it is Jesus who gets the final answer, and we can expect that miracle to be only for our good. E, for living with expectation.

Then, because this thing called life is a team effort, let's talk about God's part in providing HOPE.

H - Help. Sometimes we forget to look, but if we're honest, we can see God's hand and help at work in our lives, the lives of our family and friends, and even in this world...when we really look. God is our ever-present help. As Martin Luther says in his song:

"A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper, he is amid the flood of mortal ills, prevailing." H, God helps us always.

O - Omnidience: That's a big word, for sure, and many of us learned that term in catechism. It means that God is all knowing; God knows everything from beginning to end. That is so big our minds can't comprehend it. But if God knows the universe and holds it together, then surely God knows our situations and is doing God's thing for the benefit of all. O, God is omniscient.

P - Purpose: One of the most helpful things we can do as we live our lives is to find the purpose in every experience. That is not always easy. But time and time again, we hear stories of people experiencing really hard stuff and then finding purpose in sharing it with someone else who is going through something similar. And in that way, pain is shared and lessened; through that purposeful experience is grace. Is God's purpose to hurt? Absolutely not. But is God's purpose for God's presence to be known even in the hard stuff, yes. God gave his only Son to die for us, there's nothing harder than that, and yet out of that experience is resurrection life for all of us through Jesus Christ. P is for God's purpose.

E - Engagement. God is not far off, no, God came to us through Jesus to engage us and show us how to live this life, as tricky as it

can sometimes be. God is here; God is involved; God is invested in our day to day lives. E, God engages us every day.

So, what are you looking for? What kind of dissatisfaction are you wishing to tend to and change? What kind of hope do you long for in uncertain times?

Here's my prayer for you: May your resolutions and big changes this year be met with deep and hopeful living. May your behavior changes be meaningful as you feel the peace, wonder and hope of our savior. May you experience the special presence of Jesus in your heart, and come to know the immense love God has for you as sons and daughters. May you remember the partnership with Jesus that you and *all* of us are called to live out. And finally, may you know, live and share with others God's Hope, God's light and God's love, most fully known in Jesus, as the ultimate gift of these uncertain times and the season of change that is upon us.

Amen

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