

“Notice, Share, Invite”  
+ 2 Epiphany, Year A +  
Isaiah 49:1–7; 1 Corinthians 1:1–9; John 1:29–42  
January 19, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel for this day.

I read this week that if you really want to understand why the Christian church is declining in North America, you need to recognize how frightened most people are by the word “evangelism.” For some, it comes from being on the receiving end of someone else’s evangelism. Whether asked “Have you accepted Jesus?” by a domineering in-law or “Do you know where you’re going when you die?” by a well-meaning but intense co-worker, too many folks have experienced evangelism as coercive, even threatening.

For others, the explanation isn’t nearly as sinister. It may be a conviction that religion isn’t something polite people talk about; or that one’s faith is private; or simply the desire not to be perceived as one of *those people* (you know, the kind we just described).

Whatever the reason, most church members not only have little experience in evangelism but are downright frightened by it. And that, of course, cripples our ability to reach out with the Good News. In light of this situation, the Apostle John’s story of Jesus’ baptism might be the perfect reading to invite us not only to admit our dis-ease with evangelism but also begin to overcome it.

Except this isn’t exactly John’s account of Jesus’ baptism, at least not as told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Each of those writers records Jesus coming to John the Baptist to be baptized, describes the descent of the dove, and shares the message of the heavenly voice. But the Fourth Evangelist is characteristically different. Here we get a second-hand account from the testimony of John the Baptist. But, quite interestingly, he doesn’t actually baptize Jesus in this gospel; instead he only shares what he sees.

That may be the larger point of this story from the Fourth Gospel -- that when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, our primary job is to see and share. Not threaten, not coerce, not intimidate, not woo or wheedle or plead, but simply to see and share.

John the Baptist does that here. He sees the dove descend upon Jesus and tells others what he sees. That’s it. Andrew later does the same. He tells his brother what he and John’s other disciples’ saw concluding Jesus is the real deal Messiah -and invites his brother Peter to come along and see for himself.

Can it be that simple? At its heart, evangelism is taking notice of how God has kept God’s promises throughout all of Scripture, paying attention to what God has done and is doing through the power of the Spirit at work in the Word, Sacrament, among God’s people and in our own lives, sharing that with others, and inviting them to come and see for themselves.

Why do I think that? Because this isn't only what John the Baptist does, and it's not only what Andrew does. It's also what Jesus does. When Jesus notices some of John's disciples following him, he asks them what they are looking for. They, in turn, ask where he is staying. He doesn't give an answer. He doesn't question further. All he does in response is make an invitation: "Come and see."

**So: Notice. Share. Invite.** These are the three elements of evangelism, sharing the good news of what God has done and is still doing through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us and all the world.

The challenge, of course, is not that we have little or no experience in being eu-angelos' (sharing the Good News like the angels declared it from the heavens at Bethlehem) it is that, well, it is increasingly daunting in our society that is inclusive of all and yet fearful of what "Christians" might have to share. So let's begin with a little refresher:

**Notice.** A couple of years ago in a sermon I suggested that we gather at the coffee hour or begin each meeting with five minutes of folks taking turns naming where in Scripture they saw or through prayer or in a daily interaction with another experienced the presence of God in the world and their lives. At first that may be difficult, I know. Perhaps it would be easier to start by naming places we saw where God needed to be - places of tragedy, distress or Then, over time we may get better at noticing where God actually is active - praying for a siren when we hear one, for first responders or relief workers or noticing a caring neighbor or friend. With intention, over time, the Holy Spirit develops in us the capacity to see God in our lives and the world if only we will Notice/pay attention.

**Share.** Most of us are nervous about sharing our faith. Yes, I said, "us" because it has not always been natural for me. A friend of mine noticed when we were at lunch that I drop a phrase to servers to identify myself as a pastor, saying, "I put myself through seminary working as a server. You have a difficult job." Since I also was a switchboard operator, custodian, child care worker, archivist and catalogued art during seminary I have many points of entry to converse about faith. At the bank or anywhere I have to use someone's pens to sign something I will say, "I try not to steal pens, I'm a pastor." Again, being intentional, noticing opportunities, and thinking of ways to open a conversation in a non-threatening way is a good way to overcome what is a very natural fear.

One simple thing is to put into words why you like your church - what do you like about Jehovah? Why do you come here? Tell someone your answer before you leave church this morning. It doesn't have to be someone you don't know - not everyone is comfortable talking to people they are only acquainted with. Start with a friend - and think of friends you have that you've never shared this information with before - people outside of our circle here at Jehovah. One pastor had the congregation do this during the sermon. He was afraid of what he'd hear. Then an elderly man came up to him afterward and said, "I want to thank you. You see, this gal and I have been going to church together for sixty years. And it turns out we've never known why the other comes!" Yes, we can learn.

**Invite.** This may at first seem the hardest of all. It can feel so intrusive, and of course it puts demands on us to follow through. And yet ... think about it: we invite people to things all the time. To join a book club or play tennis, to go to an after-school event or to come over for dinner, to attend a sporting event or to go shopping. We're actually quite good about inviting folks to come to things ... just not to church. And, of course, we invite people to those things we really like, those things we've enjoyed and think others would, too. We need to ask ourselves first, what about my church life do I value? Then, our task is simply to think about who might also enjoy what we love about Jehovah.

Beyond all this, one more thing: think about how small these things are as they play out in the first chapter of John's Gospel, and yet also notice what huge results they have, reaching far beyond what the participants involved could ever have imagined. John the Baptist simply shares the wonder of what he saw, and Jesus gains his first disciples, people who will carry his message to the ends of the earth. Jesus invites them to come and see, and they leave their homes and families to embark upon God's great adventure. Andrew tells his brother he really ought to meet Jesus, and the rock upon whom Jesus will build his church, the one who will say, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" out loud in certain faith, came, saw and followed in faith.

From the beginning of creation until now, God delights in taking little things -- things the world decides are nothing - and doing something wonderful through them. So also with our initial attempts to share faith, our tentative ventures into telling others what we've seen and felt. They may feel like very small efforts, yet the God who brought light from darkness and raises the dead to life wants to -- and will! -- do marvelous things through them. AMEN.