

Epiphany 2
January 18, 2009
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

John 1:43-51

Let us begin today in prayer.

Lord Jesus, of all those wise, insightful, talented people whom you might have called to come and follow you, you called us. Although we, through our weaknesses and limitations are unworthy of such trust, we are here in church better to prepare ourselves for your ministry. During this time of worship, give us the gifts we need to be the disciples that you deserve. Equip us for the tasks to which you assign us. Send us forth as those empowered to do your will in all we say and do. Amen.

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Two weeks ago, on the second Sunday of Christmas, our text for the day was the very beginning of the Gospel of John. We heard the words, “In the beginning was the Word...” This is the nativity story of Jesus, according to John.

At that time I told you that those words are intended to immediately remind us of the creation story in Genesis: “In the beginning.” It is as if John is telling us that the coming of Jesus into the world is a new creation, a new beginning.

Now if you'll remember the story of creation as told in Genesis, no sooner had God begun creating the world than God also creates people. And no sooner than God had done that than he gives His people a task. The story says:

Let us make man in our own image, and let us give him dominion over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every thing that creeps upon the earth.

So God created people in His image. In the image of God He created them, male and female. God blessed them and said,

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

What is surprising in this story is that God enlists the help of some of his creation in governing the creation.

We're also told that we are created in the image of God. Many times when we ponder this Genesis account of creation we interpret this to mean our function, as creatures, to govern creation, just as God rules over all of creation. This is certainly an awesome task!

But another way of looking at this is to say that we humans, we creations of God, are created to be about doing the business of God. We don't only share God's image, but God has given us a share in His work. God has delegated certain tasks to us creatures.

This thought is continued in 2nd Corinthians, chapter 5, where Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come." Then Paul says,

God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... entrusting to us the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ. Since God is making his appeal through us, we entreat you, therefore, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

God has not only created us, but given us godly work to do. We are ambassadors for Christ, carrying on the work of God. When you are out there saying to someone, "I forgive you," or "I am determined to love you," you are there as an ambassador, according to St. Paul. You are there doing God's work.

What I'm saying here is that the same echoes from the first chapter of Genesis that we hear in the first chapter of John – “In the beginning was the Word” – continue today as we move deeper into the first chapter of John in today's assigned Gospel reading. *Jesus begins his work in the world by calling disciples.*

That's rather amazing when you think about it. We were just introduced to Jesus just a few verses before. Jesus has not done any preaching or teaching, no miraculous work. Before any of that, he calls everyday, ordinary people like us to work with him. There is something about Jesus that makes him reach into ordinary folks' lives and call them to do his work.

So many Sundays we come to church in order to celebrate our faith in God, in order to deepen our faith in Christ and his kingdom. This Sunday, let us celebrate – let us marvel at – *Christ's faith in us.* All that Jesus wants for the world, all that he expects from his life and death, all that is meant to be is given to us, Jesus' disciples.

Perhaps that's part of what Jesus means when, in today's Gospel, he promises Philip and Nathanael that they will be privileged to see "greater things than these." It's an allusion to the story of their great-great grandfather in the faith, Jacob. Jacob was called to be a progenitor of the people of Israel and he got to see a great ladder let down from heaven. What's amazing is not only that Jacob got this heavenly vision but that *Jacob* got this vision – Jacob the liar, Jacob the scoundrel got to see things that few mortals see.

Well, Jacob is your ancestor as well. And you, like Jacob, may not be the best people in the world, and you, like Philip and Nathanael, may not be the most insightful people. But what you are is the people whom Jesus has called to follow him and to be part of his revolution. And that means you'll see some amazing things.

Now that the Word Made Flesh has come and moved in with us, amazing things are happening, amazing things right here in this congregation. Today, let's just say that one of the most amazing things is that Jesus has given his work to people like you and to people like me.¹

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Now if some of you are thinking that this all sounds an awful lot like an evangelism sermon, you're absolutely right. While up to this point I have not explicitly mentioned the work that God has set before us creatures, you're smart enough to know what's coming next. The task that God has for us – as they used to say on the old “Mission: Impossible” TV series – “should you choose to accept it,” is to be about the work of telling others about Jesus.

Don't you just *cringe* when someone says the word *evangelism*? That simple word stirs up images of half-crazed street-corner evangelists booming out their messages of doom and gloom to unsuspecting passers-by.

But guess what? That's not what I'm asking of you. In fact, I wouldn't *want* you to do that. Because I don't think that's the best way for us to reach people with God's message of love.

Remember earlier that I said that God created us to be about doing the business of God? You were created for this task. I'm not asking you to do anything you weren't created for. God made you and gives you everything you need to be about doing His work in the world.

I'm going to let you in on a BIG secret. Are you ready? It's all about relationships. Evangelism is about being in relationship with other people. This is one of the first lessons we learn about God: that God **wants** to be in relationship with *us*. And from there, God wants us to be in relationship with *others*. It's just that easy. You can't tell someone about Jesus if you're not in relationship with them.

The next thing is to have a story to tell. *What difference does your faith in Jesus make in your life?* When you tell someone about Jesus, they're not interested in a theological treatise giving all of the logical reasons for belief; they want to know how Jesus has changed your life, and how Jesus might change their life, too.

I find this might be the most difficult part for Lutherans, especially us cradle-born Lutherans. We've *always* been a part of the faith community. Many, if not most, of us don't have a miraculous conversion story to tell. Our faith is just a comfortable part of who we are.

One of my favorite movies is “The Princess Diaries.” This is a coming-of-age film, done in the Disney princess way. It’s the story of 15-year-old Mia Thermopolis, whose estranged grandmother suddenly arrives on the scene to inform her that she is actually part of a long royal line ruling the fictional country of Genovia. Mia struggles with her new identity, but finally tells her grandmother that she doesn’t think she’s meant to be a princess. So she resolves to resign her claim to royal title. Toward the end of the film, however, Mia has an epiphany – that her royal calling is about more than herself. It’s about all the good she can do on behalf of others by laying claim to this title. In one of the closing lines of the film she says, “This morning I was just Mia. But now I am Amelia Thermopolis Reynaldi, *Princess of Genovia.*”

It is my hope for all of us gathered here today that we can lay claim to our title as beloved children of God. What’s more, I would hope that each of us has a story to share as to why this makes a difference in our lives.

To that end, I will be offering a special course during our Lenten season to help participants discover the special gifts that God has woven into your being. This course is intended to help you discover your particular story of faith, and learn ways to begin to share it with others.

One of the most amazing things is that Jesus has given his work to people like you and to people like me. I invite you to journey with me in Lent to discover ways that God may be calling you to go about this business that God has given to all of us, to be modern-day disciples and join with God in reconciling all people to Himself.

Amen.

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¹ The foregoing section owes a great debt to the writings of William Willimon in *Pulpit Resources*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions), 14-5.