

Last Sunday, I suggested that one reason why you all come to Worship is because you are seekers. We learn a few things about seeking from the Magi who came from far away to find the Christ child and then went home a different way. Well this morning, John the Baptist and the prophet Isaiah offer us more to learn about ourselves in relation to God: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

"It is not about me." That is what we hear in the gospel of John, the fourth gospel, whenever people ask John the Baptist who he is. He's not the Christ, not Elijah, not someone worthy of the One who is to come. (1) He is named John the Baptizer, the one who calls for repentance, the one who prepares the way for the Messiah.

Again and again John points away from himself to this Other. To many North American ears, John's refusal to claim his own status may sound odd. Hasn't he heard about the need for good self-esteem or the importance of striving to be number one? Who ever heard of pointing to your competition? But John lives out his passionate commitment to serve as a witness, first about God's call and then about Jesus Christ. John tells his story loud and clear, that he didn't know Jesus, but that God told him how to recognize the One to come: *He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.* John sees this and experiences an epiphany, the revelation of Jesus' true identity. And the next day, when John sees Jesus again, he names him publicly: *Look--the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and the Son of God.*

We may find John's passion and self-effacing witness somewhat daunting—but then again, we've felt that way, haven't we, when we've known what is the necessary and right thing to do, perhaps speaking up for someone who has been ignored or unfairly treated? Or following the pull or push of God's call to offer our gifts in a particular way? John's deep faith and fervent testimony can serve as a powerful example of servant hood for us, as individual Christians and as the church. *I came baptizing with water so that the one who ranks ahead of me might be revealed to Israel.* It's not about me, it's not about us, it is about Jesus Christ, who reveals the compassionate and righteous ways in which we are to serve God and one another in holy community.

We are here in Worship not only as seekers, but also as servants.

Centuries before John the Baptist, the prophet Isaiah tells his story of servanthood—or the story of someone called to be a servant. Named and called by God before he was born, *"God said to me, You are my servant in whom I will be glorified."* *"But I, I said..."* Stammering in hesitation, this servant expresses his unworthiness and lack of success. *"I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity."* He is weary and discouraged from working on God's behalf. Sound familiar? We know how frustrating it can be when our work for positive change meets resistance or setbacks, how overwhelming it can be to face again and again the challenges of human division or violence or poverty.

Yet, in spite of feeling inadequate, the servant doesn't lose hope: *yet surely,*" he says, *my cause is with the LORD.* He remembers that he's not speaking from a place of weakness, for God has given him speech as sharp as a sword and words like arrows. He remembers that God formed him to serve so that the scattered tribes of Israel might be restored. *I am honored in the sight of the Lord and my God has become my strength,* this servant proclaims, affirming who he is and where his faith lies.

And so can we as people named, claimed and called by God to servant hood.

But that's not the end, oh no, it's only the beginning, because God is always on the move. God isn't satisfied with renewing this servant's call but unexpectedly expands it. *I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.* In an earlier passage, Isaiah proclaimed salvation as God's order of compassionate justice for all people. Yikes, God, lay it on us, will you??

But isn't this how God calls us throughout our lives, urging us to be more than what we are at any given point, stretching us each time, as if to say: "there is more I want from you, you have no idea of all that you can be and do!" Or as God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah: *For I know the plans I have for you, to give you hope and a future...*

Think of all the names, titles and roles you have had through the years: in your families, in your professions, volunteer positions, recreational activities—mom, son, doctor, coordinator, coach, mentor, church member. Think of all the nicknames, nice and not-so-nice: honey, scrabble champion, best friend, troublemaker, control freak! Each reveals something about you, your gifts, your relationships, and at times, even your weaknesses. These names may change, but God never stops reminding us of who we are at the core of our being, named, claimed and called to be "servants" for the glory of God.

Yes, our call to servant hood involves both promise and pain, passion and problems. As we find our way through confusion or uncertainty, however, we know that everything we do can make a positive difference, close by and far away. We too are called to become "a light to the world," by what we choose to buy and wear and eat, by how we vote and spend money, by how we speak to and about other people, by how we live out the name "servant of God in Christ."

John the Baptist tells others what he has heard and seen, pointing always to the One on whom God's Spirit remains. Two of John's disciples hear this proclamation and follow Jesus, who turns around and asks them: ***What are you looking for?*** And this is how Jesus' ministry begins in the gospel of John, with a demanding question! "What are you seeking? What do you need?"

How would you answer? "Jesus, can I get back to you in a few days?" Or, "Jesus, can I spend some time with you in order to figure this out?" Of course, we might give more concrete and pragmatic answers, such as: "God, we're looking to balance our church budget" or "I'm seeking recovery from illness or surgery." We may feel at times as though we're seeking to resolve one daily crisis after another, but God's story is always larger than ours, weaving our strands

together, and calling us to see a new horizon of possibility. Not for ourselves alone but for the world God loves. (2)

John's two disciples answer Jesus with an odd-sounding question: *Where are you staying?* Commentator Audrey West writes that they're not asking about the location of Jesus' tent or guest house, but rather: Where can we go to be with you? For Jesus is the one on whom God's Spirit remains, abides, dwells. Where can we find you and be in the presence of God? (1)

And Jesus answers: ***Come and see.*** This is the invitation and exhortation that the gospel of John proclaims, for all peoples are invited, all nations. Come and see, seek to know Jesus in his full identity. If you want to know the word made flesh, come and see Jesus. If you want to know what love is like or what speaking the truth to power is like, come and see Jesus. Come and see, so that you may find who you are, named and called by God to become a light and blessing for the world.

John's two disciples follow Jesus and stay with him, remain with him that day. One of them tells his brother Simon *We have found the Messiah.* And so Simon comes to Jesus, who gives him a new name: *Cephas (Peter).* This is how the Holy Spirit moves from person to person, forming a community of new seekers and servants. This will be so because of who God is: Creator, Christ and Spirit.

We're about to design a new sign for our church; How about the "Sanbornton Congregational Church, Seekers, Servants>>" and then an arrow? Proclaiming that "It's not about us," with the arrow pointing to God's realm out in the world, where the Spirit is continually gathering us together to build God's beloved community.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

NOTES

- 1) West, Audrey. Commentary on John 1: 29-42. www.workingpreacher.org. January 15, 2017. Thanks for the theme "It's not about me," with John the Baptist pointing away from himself and toward Christ.
- 2) Oden, Amy. Commentary on Isaiah 49: 1-7. www.workingpreacher.org. January 15, 2017.

RESOURCES

www.workingpreacher.org. Commentaries by: Audrey West, Amy Oden, Christine Roy Yoder and Bo Lim on the readings from Isaiah and the gospel of John for 1/15/2017.

Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1.* "Second Sunday after the Epiphany:" commentaries on the readings from Isaiah and the gospel of John.

Brueggeman, Walter, and Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, James Newsome. *Texts For Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary, Year A.* Westminster John Knox Press (Louisville, KY; 1995), 100-108.

Craddock, Fred and John Hayes, Carl Holladay, Gene Tucker. *Preaching Through the Christian Year, A*. Trinity Press International (Harrisburg PA; 1992), 83-89.