

“Come and see.” Such a friendly, simple and inviting phrase. “Come and see.” So much sweeter than insisting that other people must be different than they are. So much kinder than threatening with hellfire and damnation. Not only that, but the simple phrase “Come and see” is a fair summary of the message of John’s Gospel.

And yet, when we think about inviting people to come to church with us—when we think about inviting friends and family, let alone people that we don’t know or have just met—when we think about evangelizing, to put it bluntly, we don’t seem to be comfortable offering even something as simple, non-threatening and open as this modest invitation to the people that we interact with in our daily lives outside the church.

I don’t make this observation to point fingers or to shame anyone. That hesitation is a real challenge that won’t change much by our deciding just to do it better. Studies confirm the hunch that one of the most influential factors bringing new people into a church is a personal invitation. The church’s reputation in the community is important, yes; the beauty of the building and style of worship are important; music is important; our website is important; the theology behind the preaching—these are all important, but the number one reason people give for coming to a church for the *first* time is that someone invited them personally.

We’re still early enough in 2015 to add this to our New Year’s resolutions: “I will invite a new person to church every month this year.” That may actually be a fruitful decision. The future of the church may well depend on ordinary, everyday Christians summoning the courage to invite people to come and see what they have found in the community of the faithful that is their congregation. But there is also some wisdom hidden in our hesitation. Why, given what God so graciously gives us here, why don’t we invite everyone we encounter to “come and see”?

I wonder if some of the hesitation involves an unexplored assumption. Perhaps there is some untested assumption that we—you and I—are responsible for proving the Christian faith to people we don’t know. Or that we are responsible for persuading someone else to become a Christian. That is certainly the face of evangelism that gets

the bulk of media coverage, isn't it? If that doesn't feel quite right to you, you might just be an Episcopalian. Our scripture readings this morning provide an excellent platform for exploring the assumptions that may be causing us to hesitate.

What if we are not responsible for proving the existence of God? What if we are not responsible for proving that the Christian way of responding to God is life-changing? What if we are not responsible for proving that the Episcopal way of being Christian in the world can be transformational?

In our Old Testament reading, "the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under the priest Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." So when God called him, Samuel naturally assumed it was Eli. After this happened three times (a perfect number in Hebrew thinking), Eli realized that God was calling to Samuel and told the boy to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." When Samuel responded as Eli had taught him, God began to change Samuel's life forever.

The voice of God disturbed Samuel's sleep until Samuel responded to God directly and personally. God knew Samuel deeply and intimately long before Samuel knew God. God knew Samuel, whose name means "God has heard." For God to call any of us means God knows our name. God has searched us and known us. God's eyes beheld our unformed substance. God, ultimately transcendent and intimately involved in the depths of every human heart, knows each of us and speaks to us, and claims us long before we know how to respond.

The pattern holds in our Gospel reading. Jesus decided to go to Galilee where he found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." And then Philip found Nathanael and delivered his message: "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote." If we stop right there, Nathanael's story is the model for evangelists who think Christians are responsible for creating other Christians, as though evangelism was some kind of marketing scheme.

Nathanael responded to Philip's rather bold statement naturally with skepticism. This is the pattern that so often starts to play out in our heads when we imagine trying to talk someone else into becoming a Christian. "Convince me," we imagine them saying.

“Says you.” “What’s your evidence?” “Prove it. Give me logical, rational proof.” Philip could have offered some evidence that Jesus was impressively knowledgeable about scripture. He could have shared a powerfully emotional, felt experience. Or he could have countered Nathanael’s suspicion about people from Nazareth with a list of notably pious Nazarenes.

But he didn’t. Instead of marketing or arguing or reasoning, Philip took Nathanael to a place where he knew Jesus would be: “Come and see.” Nathaniel came and saw for himself. And this is the point where we can update our unexamined assumption about what evangelism is.

You see, because the whole pattern shifts when Jesus meets Nathanael. Jesus found and saw Philip before Philip saw Jesus; before Philip knew Jesus, he was known by Jesus; before Philip chose Jesus, he was chosen by Jesus. And now, having brought Nathanael into the presence of Christ, Philip is silent because his work is done. Nathanael now face to face with Jesus hears Jesus say, “I saw you...before Philip called you.” As soon as Nathanael understands that Jesus has known him, he responds by *naming* Jesus: “Rabbi, you are the son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Nathanael has an epiphany: an immediate, meaningful awakening. Sudden and profound. Jesus’ answer recognizes Nathanael’s awakening. The Greek can be read: “Because I said to you that I saw you underneath the fig tree, you believe. You will see greater than this.”

We think of the season of Epiphany as the season of the manifestation and revelation of Jesus. About finding and seeing Jesus in moments of awakening. Yes. Epiphany is also a season of recognizing that Jesus finds and sees us *first*, and does the same for everyone we meet. We may have some success in persuading or arguing or reasoning with people to consider Christianity. But Eli simply told Samuel how to respond to what he was already experiencing. Philip simply invited Nathanael to a place where he knew Jesus would be. We can also invite people to a place where we know Jesus will be.

God already knows them, even if they have only the vague sense of being disturbed from their sleep. God already calls them, even if they do not yet name God or recognize God's voice. God is already working within them, even if they are not yet aware of God's presence in the depths of their lives. We can invite people to come to a place where we see love made tangible.

In a moment, we will gather our pledges and the bread and wine that represent ourselves, our souls and bodies, already found and claimed by God. Because God has given to us in love, we give back to God in love. Just like the bread and wine that will be transformed in the Eucharist, we are gathered, transformed and given for others. We are transformed from just a group of people into a unique manifestation of the body of Christ to be God's own loving presence in a world yearning for love.

God gathers us and calls others to this place to learn how to say "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Through our prayer and worship, our sitting in silence, our shared conversations and meals, God heals, strengthens and transforms us so that we are increasingly awake to God. God sends us out to live reconciling, peaceful and justice-loving lives just where we are in our roles and relationships as parents, partners, sons and daughters; as attorneys, fishermen or accountants; bankers, stay-at-home parents or engineers; as students, retired men and women; as healthcare workers, job-seekers, teachers.

Our relationship with God is nurtured here, and fills us with the light that we take out into those relationships and communities where we already are. That is where God has already found Philips and Nathanaels and so many others like them—God knows their names. God already knows the names of people who thirst for the love and the liberty that God wants for them. But before people can find God *everywhere*, they must be able to find God *somewhere*. With God's help, St. Elizabeth is a place is where God will be present for all and many will respond. Ours is not to change people. That is God's work. Our work is to keep this place vibrant and alive and to say, "Come and see" and trust that God—having seen them already—will gather people and transform them, if they will consent to it. Then God will send *them* out to do the work that God has given them to do. And we will see greater things than these.