

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, Second Sunday after the Epiphany, 15 January 2017
John 1:29-42
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

Last Sunday we explored the meaning of Christian baptism and I suggested that being baptized could be understood, in an important sense, as giving ourselves to the story of Jesus or, perhaps better, as *finding* ourselves in his story. In this way, Jesus connects us to the larger story of his own Jewish faith, and particularly to their special role in God's efforts to restore all of humanity and creation to their original purposes. Given this claim, it would be fair to ask two questions at this point: first, what *is* the story of Jesus and, second, *how* might we find ourselves in it; that is, what is the *process* by which we come to view our own life-stories in light of Jesus' story?

Of course, we explore these questions, in one way or another, almost every Sunday—that's what preachers do—but, as we do, I want to reiterate what I said last week: we must always remember that Jesus' story is told from the end. That is, it is always told from the perspective of, or through the lens of, his death and resurrection. We'll talk more about this as we move into Lent and toward Easter, but for now this again gives us an important clue to the significance of our own baptism—baptism ritually links us, or connects us, to Jesus in his death and resurrection. To find ourselves in this story is to find our very identity, as individuals and as a community, in Jesus' death and resurrection. It is in this way that we *orient* ourselves in the world as Christians. That should be no surprise to us, but it is perhaps a bit more challenging to spell out the *process* of how this might come about in our own lives. This question brings us to today's Gospel

lesson. Just like the first disciples, the process of finding ourselves in Jesus' story begins with an invitation, a call, from Jesus himself.

Today we move from Matthew's to John's Gospel—readings from the fourth Gospel are interspersed with the readings of the other three Gospels in our liturgical calendar. And, we can already see in John, written at the end of the first century, how the early church's growing understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection is leading the authors of the Gospels to push back his origins ever earlier. Mark, thought to be our earliest Gospel, starts Jesus' story with John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism. Matthew and Luke, as we saw at Christmas, push his roots back much further with their genealogies: Matthew to Abraham and Luke to Adam—both of them, in other words, to Genesis and the creation of the world as the Jewish tradition understands it. And then John comes along and goes even further. He connects Jesus to the Logos, the Word, that God used *prior* to creation to structure the very fabric of the created universe. It is remarkable that this development took place such a short time after Jesus' death and resurrection—it is an implication of his being understood as Messiah and Lord of the world, and confirmed as such in the resurrection.

In any case, with this heady introduction, the author of John also quickly moves on to John the Baptist and we immediately see why this reading is included in the season of Epiphany. John the Baptist claims that it is through his baptism with water that Jesus is “revealed” or made manifest to Israel. But even John himself does not seem to recognize who Jesus is until he sees the Spirit of God descending on him after his baptism, anointing him as the Messiah and marking him as the Son of God. After this, Jesus loses no time in beginning his public

ministry, and he does this by calling his first disciples (and, just as a passing observation, do not miss the fact that his first two disciples were originally John's; this, again, may be evidence of an early tension between John's and Jesus' followers).

Now, as we look at the call of the first disciples, I want to direct our attention to three things in this part of the lesson that might have significance for understanding our own calls. First, Jesus asks them, "What are you looking for?" Second, after they answer—not quite truthfully, perhaps, or at least tentatively, since they answer by deflecting his question and asking him one of their own about where Jesus is staying. They ask Jesus where he's staying. Jesus, however, doesn't seem to mind. He tells them to, "Come and see." And, third, after they become convinced that Jesus is the one they've been waiting for, Jesus gives at least some of them new names. These three points may suggest an understanding or a pattern of what I'm calling the process whereby we come to find ourselves in Jesus' story.

When Jesus asks them, "What are you looking for?" it implies they were already seeking something or someone. They had a need or desire that had, before they met Jesus, been unfulfilled or unrealized, though they also were filled with expectation based on their own hopes and dreams. For me, and, I imagine, for many of us, my spiritual life began to deepen when I realized and accepted that my life lacked something important. I was reading a book that suggested I meditate on the question, "What is my deepest desire?" In finally naming that desire, I began again, after a long hiatus, to redefine myself in relation to the story of Jesus. His question to the first disciples on that day long ago suggests that the

process of finding ourselves in his story begins with a felt need or desire, and the hope or the hunch that Jesus might be able to address it. What are we looking for? We may not know at first, but like disciples we sometimes are blessed to look in the right direction.

But, interestingly, when those first disciples turn toward Jesus, he doesn't immediately try to address their need or desire by teaching them or answering all their questions. We also saw that they seem reluctant to say too much at first, in any case. They hesitate to make themselves vulnerable to him, so he says simply, "Come and see." There is much in this little sentence, especially in the Gospel of John. Seeing is John's way of talking about conversion, about coming to faith or believing; it's also about how the future kingdom of God becomes present in our current time. Finding ourselves in Jesus' story involves following him to the point that we begin to see, with new eyes, how our lives might be redefined in relation to him. We see the world differently because we have been invited to do so by Jesus. It is an *invitation*; it is not coercion or domination. Said differently, this invitation is an act of love. But we must also turn toward Jesus. Turning toward, and then beginning to follow Jesus, even guardedly or tentatively, is required of us. It's a first step in coming to faith or in deepening our faith—it may not be a full-blown or mature trust at this point, but it's a turn in Jesus' direction. Turning around, turning toward Jesus, is the meaning of repentance.

Finally, once the disciples are on the way with Jesus—and, "The Way" was the original name of the movement Jesus began—they began to grow and mature in their faith. At some point, they realize what Jesus says to them later—they have put their hands to the plow and they can't look back. At some point, their

identity as individuals becomes tied to Jesus' identity, to his story, and they are committed. Some of them are given new names, as we are given our names in baptism, symbolizing their new identities and roles. They will, of course, continue to grow and mature—we know they took three steps forward and two back before they truly realized, only after the resurrection, what was at stake in their commitment to Jesus. But the entire process profoundly changed them, and it very soon profoundly changed the world.

Now, I'd be the first one to admit that the process of finding ourselves in Jesus' story that I'm describing this morning is over-simplified. But it gives us a sense of how we might begin, and then grow ever more deeply in our faith. We have a felt need that must be recognized and acknowledged; we turn, in our freedom, toward Jesus, even if perhaps tentatively and hesitantly; and, at some point, we kind of wake up to being different people. We are no longer our own, but we belong to Jesus. We have had our own epiphanies, and have found ourselves in his larger story, joining the purpose of our lives to his and, through him, to God's.

What are we looking for today? Come and see. Amen.