

Lights of Christ

John 1:43-51

January 15, 2012

Sermon preached by Rev. Donald Ng at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco.

On Christmas Eve, we concluded our service by reading the opening of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word...the Word was light...in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness.” These are grand and beautiful words that we also read when we complete our Maundy Thursday Service before Good Friday because even on the cross, this light will shine again on Easter morning.

What John was doing here in the beginning of his gospel is to echo Genesis 1. When God created the world, “In the beginning, God said, ‘Let there be light...And there was light, light shining into the darkened void’” In John’s opening words, he is claiming that Jesus Christ is the light of the world. In Jesus, it’s like Genesis 1 all over again. It’s like God is again making something out of nothing, resuming the good creation that we have so botched with our sin, light shining in the dark. In this season of Epiphany, we are reflecting on how the light of Christ shines into all the world.

Great Delegator

Jesus begins his ministry by calling a group of ordinary people to be his disciples. This is the way Christ the Light of the world brings light in a world of darkness. All of the gospels begin the story of Jesus’ ministry in the same way—Jesus calling disciples. Today’s lesson is the Gospel of John’s account of that glorious genesis of how Christ’s light breaks up the darkness.

Some of you may be wondering at this point: If Jesus is the light of the world, the beginning of new creation, why doesn’t he just shine? In Genesis 1, it sure looks like God did it all by himself in just seven days!

Why does Jesus begin with recruiting a bunch of ordinary people to shine with him? Why doesn’t he just start recreating? Why does he require these ordinary, untrained, ill-suited and (as we shall learn later in the story) not very bright people to be his disciples and work with him? Why doesn’t Jesus just do all this good himself?

Whatever it is that Jesus Christ wants to do for the world, he chooses not to do it alone. He invites a group of ordinary, everyday people (people like you and me) to do it with him. Jesus refuses to save the world all by himself.

Summoned

Some of you think that you got out of bed on this chilly January morning and came to church because you wanted to, you decided to, you are such a good, committed Christian person that you chose to come worship here this morning. Well, an implication of today’s Gospel is that you didn’t choose to come here on your own decision; you were invited, summoned, called. Why you? Because that’s the way Jesus does business.

We are Christians, not on the basis of something we decided but on the basis of an invitation that we received. It’s like getting a baby party invitation and you decided to accept. Jesus doesn’t like to work alone. All the Gospels begin the story of Jesus’ work by telling the story of Jesus calling his disciples to work with him.

In John's Gospel, did you notice that Jesus called Andrew and the first thing Andrew does is to rush out, finds his brother Simon, and preached, "We have found the Messiah!"?

Then Jesus finds Philip and calls him, and then Philip rushes out looking for Nathaniel. When Philip invites Nathaniel to follow Jesus, Nathaniel snidely asks, "Jesus of Nazareth? Can anything good come out of a hick town like Nazareth?" Philip says, "Come and see for yourself."

All of the Gospels record Jesus calling his disciples. Jesus is walking along the road and sees a couple of fishermen bent over their nets. "Follow me!" he calls. Jesus intrudes into the tax collector's house where he sees Matthew bent over his coins and calls "Follow me!"

In John's Gospel we see some of Jesus' disciples being called by other disciples. Sometimes Jesus directly calls people to follow him; sometimes people call other people to follow Jesus. Jesus chooses to not work alone but to call other people, his disciples to work with him.

Disciples Calling Others

Some of you are here this morning because the risen Christ appeared directly to you and dramatically, personally, directly called you. Like the disciples in the Gospels and the Apostle Paul, you have been very blessed to have such a calling. In my experience, not many become disciples that way.

For most of us, I suspect that more of you are here this morning because another disciple, like Philip, like Andrew, called you to follow Jesus. Somebody told you the story or lived the story of Jesus before you in such a way that eventually led you to say, "Yes." Jesus not only chooses to work through other people but Jesus also works through people to call other people.

During my high school years at First Baptist in Boston, I was already a pretty active churchgoer. I attended Sunday School with teachers like Mrs. Marianne Norman and Mrs. Beatrice Wyatt. They would call me to make sure I came to church.

There were seminarians who would spend a year practicing how to preach and do church administration like Rick Harris and Eugene Dawson. These students would call us and invite us to visit the seminary where they were studying and eventually Andover Newton would become the seminary for me.

Our pastor was Rev. Charles W. Griffin who created my very first church-paying job of being the Church School Developer when I rode in a yellow school bus around Boston picking up kids for Sunday School. Pastor Griffin gave me my first call to Christian Ministry. Rev. Griffin eventually was the pastor who officiated at our wedding.

Perhaps because my father had passed a couple of years ago, I really identified with Rev. Griffin. While he may have not been the most powerful preacher, I respected this man for his commitment to the ministry. He led an Inquirers Class for me. At Christmas time, he and his wife, Helen would always have an open house and he would be strumming his guitar singing Christmas carols in front of a roaring fireplace. We had sweets like Christmas cookies that our own mother did not know how to make.

Our church in Boston began to struggle to gain members. The families living around the church were quickly being replaced by college students. The world was changing and for some reasons, our church

was not changing with it. Our members were getting grayer and older. So back in the 1960s, over 40 years ago, our church members began grumbling if the pastor needed to go. I heard that at the next church membership meeting, there would be a vote to ask for the pastor's resignation.

Still as a high school student, I remembered writing a defense paper using the story of Jesus telling the crowd that was about to stone the woman caught in adultery that if any of them have never sin to cast the first stone. After that, no one was sinless and Jesus told the woman to go and sin no more. I shared my paper with Rev. Griffin and told him that I was planning to share it at the meeting.

He counseled me about the implications and fallout that could possibly result in my sharing my defense paper. He told me that while he was touched by my loyalty to him that this church is where I grew up and that even when there are differences in opinions or understandings, it would be important for him that I maintained my relationships with the church people. He told me that it was sufficient for him to know that I supported him and that whatever happens in the upcoming meeting, it would be all right. God will watch over him as God has done all along. In the end, I decided to not share my defense paper with the church members.

But this humble and caring pastor during my high school years taught me things that I have never forgotten. My conversations with Rev. Griffin taught me something about Jesus. My pastor was a light in my life as well as at my home church even at times when it was increasingly getting darker with internal struggles. Sometimes Jesus calls disciples through other disciples who don't know how good they are at calling disciples!

Lights of the World

Later on in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world!" (8:12). And again, "I have come as light into the world!" (12:46). We are all here today because we are all united in our belief that Jesus Christ is the light of the world.

But in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus looks at this rag-tag group of people who happen to be his disciples and says, "You are the light of the world" (5:14). "Let your light shine!" Us? To tell the truth, it's much easier to look to Jesus of Nazareth and believe that he is the light of the world than to look at those of us gathered here and believe that we are called by him to be the lights of the world. It's easier for us if Jesus Christ did all the lighting up in the world.

Something about Jesus made him choose, from the first, not to save the world by himself. He seemingly is uninterested in experience, character, gifts, and skills of his disciples and goes out to invite losers and knuckleheads!

As Paul says, perhaps thinking of his own vocation on the Damascus Road, Christ chose what is trash, what is foolish and worthless, to confound the world. He chose them not because they were open and receptive to his teaching, not because he enjoyed hanging out with them, but because he wanted to lay an assignment on them. He lovingly invited them, "Come unto me" so he can order them to "Go into all the world!"

Jesus never invited the disciples to settle in, settle down, and find peace and balance. He invited them to go out to do mission. Jesus' initiative for his disciples is not about who they are, but who they became once they met Jesus, once he enlisted them in his work.

Jesus enlists ordinary folk to a much larger project than their own lives. He sweeps us up into a movement known as the Kingdom of God. Without this summons, this calling, our lives are bound to seem small and without consequence—which Christians believe our lives would be without Jesus. Jesus makes our lives mean more than they could have meant on our own.

There's a story about two pastors over a cup of coffee one morning complaining about the laity. Now, I never do this! They were having a great time getting increasingly depressed. The laity isn't really committed. The lay people don't really listen to our sermons; they are distracted. They are ill-informed, and so on.

Finally, one of the pastors said to the other, "Let me show you something."

And he led the other down the steps of his church into the dark church basement. There was a washing machine and a dryer going full tilt, presided over by two older women. The women were washing clothes and folding them into neat bundles.

"What is this?" one asked.

"When you are homeless, one of the most difficult things is to get your clothes cleaned," the pastor explained. "This is part of our ministry to the homeless who live around our neighborhood. These good people wash the clothes, tie them in bundles, and put a note on them: "God loves you and we do too."

These simple acts of love are blinding, warm, wonderful light flooding in a darkened world. It is like the first day of Creation and we get to see a whole new world unfolding before our eyes!

Our world continues to be quite dark. When the students come to Friday Night School, not only is the church brightly light up, but the teachers and the cooks who prepare the meals are the lights of Christ and we get to see a whole new world before our eyes.

When you invite your friends and co-workers to come to church like how Andrew rushes to invite his brother Simon and how Philip rushes out looking for Nathaniel, you are lights of Christ calling others to follow Jesus.

Jesus Christ chooses not to minister in the world by himself. He chooses not to do this alone. He invites you and me, just ordinary people to do it with him. Jesus tells us that we are the lights of Christ in the world.

Remember on Christmas Eve when, at the end of the service, we turned off all the lights and we began to light our candles? At first the church was eerily dark. The Advent candles and a few other candles on the windowsills were seen.

But then the light gradually spread as each person light the candle of the person seated next to them. Some of you were so eager to light each other's candles that you literally got out of your pews to reach over to share your light. In a short time, the whole sanctuary was warmly aglow and we sang "Silent Night."

Jesus is the light of the world. He illuminates one person at a time until all of us lesser lights shine together and the whole world is full of Christ's light.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, in many and diverse ways you have called each of us to follow you, to walk with you, and to speak up for you. We give you thanks that you found a way to get to us, to cut through all of our defenses and reservations, and to call us into your service.

One more thing, Lord: give us the gifts we need to be faithful to your call upon our lives. Equip us to participate fully in your ministry. Make us shine as lights to a darkened world. In your name, great light of the world. Amen.