**Gradual Epiphanies**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

for the 2nd Sunday of Epiphany

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Bedford, MA

I had a fascinating experience yesterday. I spent all day in a conference room (sounds great so far, doesn’t it)…interviewing people who are discerning whether God is calling them to be priests in the Episcopal Church. It was fascinating to hear people reflect on their faith journeys and how their relationships with God have grown and changed over the years of their lives.

It reminded me of my own interview weekend a decade ago. It was exactly 11 years ago this week. I was nervous. One of the questions was: Is your relationship with Jesus more like Paul on the Road to Damascus or like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus? I was like…um…what?

Luckily, I learned, there is not a right answer to this particular question. Both Paul and the Emmaus disciples came to know Jesus, understand something of who he was, what we was about, and turned their lives to follow him. The difference is that Paul’s conversion was sudden, rapid, involving flashes of lightening, voices from heaven, sudden blindness and then restoration of sight followed by an immediate recognition of what had happened and how his life would now change. Cleopas and other disciples on the road to Emmaus had a much more gradual experience of coming to know Jesus. At first, they didn’t really understand who he was, what his presence in the world meant, as they talked with him and walked with him for awhile they learned more. They invited him to stay with them, and they learned more. As he sat at the table and shared bread with them, they began to realize that he was Jesus, the one who had died and now had risen from the dead. Their recognition of who Jesus was, was a gradual one, that happened over time in an undramatic, very human fashion. And what it meant for their lives was something they were still working out. If you’re curious, I’m more of a Road to Emmaus guy, rather than a Damascus guy.

And, it turns out, the season of Epiphany is a season that especially lifts up this more gradual way of coming to know Jesus. Epiphany begins with the journey of the wise men to the manger, in which the attraction is a combination of intellectual calculation (reading star charts) and instinctive desire to take a journey to get to know more what was going on. But like the shepherds in the fields, the wise men’s encounter with Jesus doesn’t lead to discipleship. They know something special is happening, but the reality of who Jesus is, what he means to the world, and how relationship with him will change our lives is still very mysterious. So they go back to their lives…touched perhaps…but not necessarily transformed.

The next series of stories in Epiphany has to do with the calling of the first disciples. This week it’s Philip and Nathanael. Next week it will be Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, sons of Zebedee. These are not just people who are amazed by supernatural happenings. Rather, these folks encounters with Jesus are simple and ordinary. They are not awed into a reverent wonder by a heavenly choir of angels or the appearing of a wandering star in the sky. No. In fact, in Nathanael’s case at least, they are skeptical. They have doubts. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” I can hear myself saying something similar, different city, but same superior and dismissive attitude.

But neither Philip nor Jesus gets defensive or standoffish. Rather, they take skepticism and doubt as signs of thoughtfulness, honesty, and high personal integrity. In fact, Jesus has a longer sustained conversation with Nathanael than with pretty much any of his other disciples in John’s Gospel. Jesus knows this is only chapter one of their relationship (it’s only chapter one of John’s Gospel, too). He doesn’t judge Nathanael’s resistance, he challenges him to go deeper, ask his questions more loudly, listen to some responses, make observations, be open to new learning and integrate what is revealed. And Nathanael accepts the challenge.

Interestingly, we never hear about Nathanael again. He comes up only one more time, after Jesus’ rising. The Gospel doesn’t offer us the chance to learn about the process of his gradual coming to know Jesus. It doesn’t tell us about what I imagine is a difficult time of observing, testing, analyzing, re-thinking, changing paradigms in his mind, softening his heart. But I’m convinced those things happened for him. Because they happened for me too.

I wasn’t always someone who turned to the life of Jesus for inspiration, hope, guidance and support. And I certainly wasn’t someone who always turned to the community of those of follow Jesus, that is, the church, for comfort and strength. It was a longer journey that happened through my participation within the community of the church. Through showing up, forming relationships, being cared for, disagreeing with sermons, engaging in mission, pondering nuggets of wisdom, singing hymns, finding mentors, very slowly developing a life of prayer – that’s how I came to my own personal conversation into friendship with Jesus. That’s how my own Epiphany came.

The season of Epiphany continues with more and more stories about how initial encounters with Jesus invite us into the process of becoming his disciples. It can begin with immediate acceptance, but more often than not it begins with curiosity, skepticism, or doubt. Jesus can work with all of this, over time, if we are willing to work with him and hang in there when things get challenging.

In fact, the more closely we read the Gospels, the more we come to see that the welcoming of Jesus’ initial calling to his disciples, the comfort and strengthening of their journey with him, is integrated throughout with times of challenge. The challenges the disciples face in their journey with Jesus may get more serious as their adventures develop – but they are present even from the very beginning. For followers of Jesus, challenge is woven into the welcome, comfort and strength they find among each other. Sometimes the challenge comes from another person, from some external circumstance beyond our control. Sometimes the challenge comes from within our own hearts and minds, how we are responding to something. Either way, the challenges that come up in a life of faith are meant to teach us things, be occasions for growth, and something not to be ashamed or embarrassed about. They are just as important a part of our life of faith as welcome comfort and strength.

Those of you who are St. Paul’s regulars can probably see where I am going with this. Beginning next week, we will be adding a word to the collect for St. Paul’s. We will pray that God will help us become a community of welcome, comfort, challenge and strength. I initially proposed this in a newsletter article a year ago, and the vestry and I have been sitting with it ever since. The purpose of adding the word into the collect is to remind us that some amount of challenge in our lives is, in fact, a holy thing. Whether they stem from our own decisions or external events beyond our control, challenges are nothing we have to be embarrassed about, ashamed of, or afraid of – even though at times we might feel all three of those things. We need not hide the challenges that we face from each other (which may at times be possible), or from God (which is never possible). Our challenges can be the source material for our Epiphanies about God, about the church, even about ourselves. But for that to happen, they must be acknowledged as a real and meaningful part of the Christian life.

I am sure we will all stumble for awhile as we get used to the new phrasing of the collect, but that’s ok. And the stumbling will call our attention to it, and invite us to begin reflecting on how church can be a place for us to just be with our challenges, to acknowledge them, to offer them up to God, and perhaps to begin to see them as part of our ever-deepening journey of faith rather than something that pulls us away from it.

The challenges in our lives are opportunities for God to break in in a new way. This doesn’t mean that God causes them, simply that God uses them when they occur. But for that that use to work, we must neither deny the challenge nor rush to the solution. As the church, we can sustain each other through times of challenge, reminding each other along the way that challenges can be the gateway to new insight, deeper faith, a transformed life – and perhaps even an Epiphany…or two.