



The Rev. Paul L. Gaston +
Sunday, January 15, 2017
Epiphany 2

“Something’s Coming”

John 1:29-42

When I saw Dan Fortune for the first time this morning, I was tempted to say, “Here is the maestro. This is the one of whom the choir speaks highly.” But I thought that Dan would probably give me a very strange look. Instead of talking *to* him, I would have been talking *at* him.

In the same sense, John the Baptist seems to be talking *at* Jesus, not *to* him. There are two different accounts. In the first, John the Baptist sees Jesus “coming towards him.” But instead of greeting him, he describes him. “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” The next day, there is another odd moment. This time John is standing with two of his disciples as Jesus walks by. Again, rather than speak to Jesus, John says loudly, “Look, here is the Lamb of God.” And instead of greeting Jesus directly, he offers his perspective on the baptism of Jesus that we have been hearing about from Matthew and Luke. Notice that the role John the Baptist describes for himself is considerably larger than that suggested by the accounts in the Gospels of Matthew or Luke suggest: here we learn that John had received instructions from God before Jesus appeared at the Jordan.

What is going on? In the most direct sense, John the Baptist is fulfilling his mission. He has until now been a center of attention, a prophet that people came out from Jerusalem to hear, one who has baptized with water. But he understands that he now has a greater role to play, and in order to play it, he has to shift the attention from himself to Jesus, the one whose sandals he feels unworthy to untie. He does so in a couple of ways. They may seem awkward, but they prove effective.

First, as we have heard, John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God. We would do well to remember that our other John, the author of the Gospel of John, was not transcribing the events of a day as they occurred. Rather, he writes years later from a perspective that includes both crucifixion and resurrection. In his account he may attempt to describe what actually happened on a particular day but, even if so, his memory is informed by later events. Hence John’s phrase, “the Lamb of God,” evokes one explanation for the crucifixion, that Jesus is sacrificed so that our sins may be forgiven by God.

That idea would not have been difficult for Jesus and others to understand. Sacrificing lambs was an important part of Jewish ritual. Every day in the Temple, lambs were sacrificed by the priests as an offering to God so that the sins of the people might be forgiven. But the phrase would have been startling. For John the Baptist to identify Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” would surely have unsettled John’s disciples. It may have unsettled Jesus! Certainly, it suggests a ministry for Jesus even more important and urgent than the one John that Baptist had been called to offer.

Second, John encourages his disciples to follow Jesus. He says to those he loves most dearly, it is time now for you to leave me in order to take up a higher and more important calling. His disciples take the hint. They follow Jesus down the road, they visit him where he is staying, they spend some time with him, apparently to confirm what they have heard from John, and they are acknowledged by Jesus. Simon even receives from Jesus a new name, “Cephas,” or Peter.

What are we to make of these scenes? And—more to the point—what do they have to do with us?

First, the Gospel of John shows people trying to come to terms with Jesus, trying to understand what he would mean in their lives—almost as though they were “trying on” the language of faith in order to become more comfortable with it. The prophet John should of all people have known who Jesus was—and in a sense, he does—but even John seems to want to test his convictions, to speak them, to see what happens in response. Our own relationship with Jesus, the Christ, may offer some of the same uncertainty. When I took part in the Bishop’s Advisory Conference on Ministry in 1980, a first step towards my possible eventual ordination, I was asked by a psychologist to describe my personal relationship with Jesus. There was a lot I wanted to say, but the words I considered saying seemed inauthentic and unconvincing. What I really wanted to say was probably a little like what John the Baptist says: “Look, here comes Jesus.” You say that, with conviction, and you wait to see what happens. And something usually happens.

Kathleen Norris, who writes so beautifully about life in monasteries, describes in *The Cloister Walk* her surprise at discovering the monks weren’t much interested in her doubts or her skepticism. Instead, they gently urged her to speak the language of liturgy, to say the creed, to kneel in prayer, to say, in effect, “Look, here comes Jesus,” and to see what happens. She describes the blessing she finds in the respect shown by monks for “the slow way that words work on the human psyche.” John’s words work on the psyche of his disciples. They can work on our psyche as well.

The second point is that John himself wants to learn more by pushing others into Jesus’ path. He leads his disciples to a larger understanding of who Jesus is, then steps back to allow them to follow Jesus. That is a pretty good metaphor for the Church. One reason we come together for worship is to find Jesus in others, to find our faith more fully as we experience the faith of others, to learn more about Jesus as we watch others following him. But we also accept a mission to push others into Jesus’ path, to say, “Here comes Jesus! I think you two should become acquainted.”

And the third point I take away is that Jesus accepts those who follow him. He does not arrive on the scene like a recruiting officer, saying “Jesus wants you.” Instead, he waits. He welcomes. He empowers. But we must choose to follow. The disciples of John the Baptist could have watched Jesus walk by, thinking, if Jesus wants me, he will turn around and invite me. Instead they follow Jesus, they recognize him as Rabbi, they try to understand that he is what John has said he is, The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

I have friends who say that they would become more faithful if God would give them clear directions or if Jesus would pay them a personal visit. That sometimes happens. God’s call can pierce through the most stubborn disregard, can overcome the strongest defenses. But those who receive directions or a personal visit are often those who are listening, those who are welcoming. Jesus often visits those who have at least turned on the spiritual front porch light and unlocked the front door. Those who will follow Jesus are those who are willing to pick up their feet and enter the road, to recognize Jesus as rabbi, teacher, to go with Jesus to where he lives, as our Gospel reading says, and to listen to what Jesus has to teach them.

The season of Epiphany is like that. On the one hand, it is a time to reflect on Jesus’ making himself known to us. On the other, it is a time to be open to Jesus, to spend time in silence, to spend time in prayer, to spend time here in worship together, to spend time finding the Christ in one another. Then we will be able to join John the Baptist in looking down the road, in seeing someone coming, and in saying, to anyone who will listen, “Look. Here comes the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”