

Christ Episcopal Church Valdosta, GA
Epiphany II in Year B, January 17, 2021
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I am fortunate that there have been many times in my life where I have been in the presence of someone who just really wowed me! Call charisma, charm, adulation, style, presence, talent, appearance, aura, grace. Whatever it is. Those times and those people stand out for me and I hope that you have had similar experiences where you were in the presence of someone who just simply rocked your world. As our opening Collect puts it so very clearly: God's people who are illumined, shine with the radiance of Christ's glory. Maybe it is during those moments, I am a bit closer to Christ's presence.

The last church where I officiated as an assistant priest was St. Mary the Virgin Episcopal Church in Times Square. It was a marvelous nine years in my life as an Episcopal priest. Several years ago, at the solemn mass on the Eve of the Epiphany, I ended up walking behind Bishop Mary Glasspool during the recessional hymn. Bishop Glasspool is an assisting bishop in the Diocese of New York and her episcopacy has been anything but mild and boring. I was walking behind her during the closing hymn because I had served as her assistant at mass and I loved it because I was able to watch the reaction of the congregation to her as she was gradually processed out. The faithful were bowing or kneeling to receive her Episcopal blessing as she tapped, tapped, tapped, her crozier down the aisle. Several reached out just to touch her. She took her time, looking at the loving congregation closely, lovingly receiving the adulation of all. She had an impressive presence.

The next year, in 2018, I was watching the Golden Globes Award Show with several friends. Well. Not really. Admittedly, I wasn't really interested in the show and so I kept going in and out of the room where the TV continued its parade of poor acceptance speeches. Blah, blah. But I took notice when Reece Witherspoon took the stage to introduce Oprah who was the winner of the Cecil B. DeMille Award. As a personal aside, I like Reece Witherspoon. Reece was partly raised in Nashville, TN. Where her mother was a professor of pediatric nursing at Vanderbilt University School of Nursing. But back to the Globes. I commented to my friends that she looked fantastic as she ascended the stage to accept the award for lifetime achievement. (BTW, Oprah's speech can easily be found on YouTube, if you have the chance). For nine minutes, I was spell bound.

As Oprah spoke, the camera would pan out to the celebrities in the audience; each one as star struck as I was. They were amazed at her command of the stage, her articulate and powerful words, her sincerity and truthfulness. Oprah commanded that stage; her presence illuminated that auditorium.

I could go on and on about my many life crushes. Like the time I went to a Tina Turner concert in Atlanta and watched as she ran up and down a tiny catwalk (in heels) on an extended mechanical arm projected high over the audience ... or the time when Bishop Tutu preached a sermon at Sewanee that I will never forget.

But I'll spare you and hope that I haven't bored you to tears. With that as segue, let me now say that Jesus had to have had an incredible sense of presence about him. You now know what I am talking about when I say a sense of presence.

What was it about Jesus that caused people to believe in him and follow him and leave everything behind in order to do so? They threw down their nets for him. Leaped out of boats for him. Tossed the tax books aside. We don't know and never could know the dynamics that were present; but **what we do know** is that there was something about this man named Jesus that drew people to him. He was unforgettable.

Today we learn that Philip followed Jesus straightaway, then told Nathanael that "we" have found the one promised in the Old Testament. When Nathanael expressed skepticism about anything good coming out of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, Philip simply says, "Come and see." Nathaniel cynically wondered how **a messiah** could come from that little Podunk town of Nazareth. Nazareth didn't have a particularly good reputation. But, when Jesus tells Nathaniel that he noticed him when he was under the fig tree, Nathaniel is so impressed that he impetuously calls Jesus the "Son of God" and the "King of Israel", two of the seven titles given to Jesus in this Gospel.

Jesus' response to Nathanael is very interesting. The passage reads: "When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, "Where did you come to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree."

Two things:

The first has to do with the word ‘see’ – there are different Greek words in the Bible for our one English word “see”. Philip had said to Nathaniel, “Come and see!” And the Greek word he used for ‘see’ had to do with the use of the eyes: to look and then to see something. But twice the word ‘see’ is used by Jesus in the passage: “Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him...” and Jesus says: “I saw you under the fig tree...” On both of *those* occasions, there is a different Greek word for ‘to see’ used than the one Philip used. On both occasions, the word has nothing to do with physical sight through the eyes but, instead, speaks of spiritual perception. Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him; that is to say, he saw into Nathaniel’s heart as he approached and recognized him for who he truly was. That alone would serve to grab your attention. You know it when someone is looking into your soul while looking into your eyes.

Without doubt there was something about Jesus that captured others. The Gospels tell us that he taught as one having authority. British biblical scholar J.B. Phillips states that there was something magnetic about his person that affected those with whom he came into contact. We can recall many instances in the Gospels where Jesus had a profound, life-changing effect on the people he met: the Canaanite woman, the blind man at Bethsaida, the Roman centurion, the woman at the Pharisee’s home, Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the sick man at the Bethesda pool, the thief crucified next to Jesus, and the centurion at the foot of the cross -- to name only a few.

People met Jesus and they were forever changed. Whatever their deepest need was, Jesus met it. Then they went on to tell others what had happened to them. Come and see!

And that’s how it has worked ever since. It’s relational.....person-to-person. People become Christians because they have seen what the Christian faith has done for their fellow Christian. The saying passed down from the early years of the church still rings true: “See those Christians, see how they love one another.”

But not to worry. Our task as Christians is not to “prove” the truth of the Christian faith, although many scholars have attempted just that. Our task is not even to persuade others to become Christian. Our joyful task is to simply say, “**Come and see.**” Nathaniel came and saw for himself. And what he saw changed him forever.

Let me close with one small, additional observation based on today's Gospel. Thankfully, God does not see things as we see them. God's vision is deeper, wider, more accurate than ours combined. And that is the vision to which Jesus is forever calling us. Recall that Nathaniel cynically replies: "Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?"

Nathaniel had assumptions about Nazareth and we make similar such assumptions whenever we believe something can never change, will never get better, or can never be filled with courage, hope, or growth. I say this because many of us in this country right about now are living in fear, worry, dread, confusion, you name it. Many of the assumptions that we make entail a limitation and a narrowing of our vision or the squandering of the hope that is so desperately needed. There are so many toxic assumptions in play right now. Assumptions can narrow our vision and deny the possibility of reconciliation, healing, a different way of being, or a new way of living. Assumptions are hiding places that keep us from engaging life more fully. But God works in people and places that we least expect. Over and over again, God takes the ordinary, the fallible, and does great things. We are each created with great potential to be an instrument of God's love and peace. Sometimes it is hard to see how anything good can come out of Nazareth. But Nazareth was the place chosen by God to reveal Himself. For every Nazareth in our life, there is the grace-filled invitation to "Come and See."

So. Good people of God, today, take heart. We come – and we see....and that *just may be*, the gift of Epiphany!

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