

January 16, 2011
Epiphany 2, Year A
Isaiah 49:1-7
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

Jesus said, "Come and see."

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A fancy pants girls' school in Manhattan invited Peter Gomes, the Harvard chaplain, to speak at its commencement. Most of the girls were getting ready to matriculate at Ivies and other elite schools with mediocre football teams. Many were punching their ticket on their way to careers of wealth and power, to being mistresses of the universe.

Gomes chose to speak about the lilies of the field, the ones that grow, but "they toil not, neither do they spin, yet their heavenly father provides for them." Gomes played on the theme: "Do not be anxious about the morrow." Jesus told us that the morrow would take care of itself. Jesus encouraged us to try to live in the moment, to savor the blessings of right here, right now... a profoundly counter-cultural message.

At a reception following his speech, one father had the spunk to give Gomes some honest feedback "with fire in his eyes and ice in his voice." He called this teaching about letting go of anxiety a lot of nonsense. Gomes pointed out that this was Jesus' advice. The man said, "It's still nonsense. It was anxiety that got my daughter into this school, it was anxiety that kept her there, it was anxiety that got her into Yale, it will be anxiety that will keep her there, and it will be anxiety that will get her a good job. You are selling nonsense."¹

Gomes called him "one unsatisfied customer," and no wonder: Jesus and Gomes were undermining his parenting, his investment, his fundamental values. Gotta keep that wealth intact. Gotta keep that social position from slipping. Gotta keep that fragile sense of self based upon achievement. No time to smell the roses, or the lilies. He wanted his daughter to inherit a lot more than the house in the Hamptons.

The columnist David Brooks recently described how many of our lives are marred by anxiety, how we struggle against a powerful, distorting cultural bias. He wrote,

[We] live in a society that prizes the development of career skills but is inarticulate when it comes to the things that matter most. The young achievers are tutored in every soccer technique and calculus problem, but when it comes to their most important

decisions – whom to marry and whom to befriend, what to love and what to despise – they are on their own... Intelligence, academic performance, and prestigious schools don't correlate well with fulfillment, or even with outstanding accomplishment. The traits that do make a difference are poorly understood, and can't be taught in a classroom, no matter what the tuition."²

Church is for learning those traits. The ministry of Jesus, and his followers – you and me, involves pointing out what makes a difference, what really matters. The work of a community of Christians includes helping people experience renewal by being honest about our reality and amending our lives; helping people to connect with others who are not like themselves; helping people to build trusting relationships with God, with each other, with our inner selves; helping people to understand our lives as having an eternal, God given purpose, not a self-produced purpose; helping people to appreciate our God given significance, not self-achieved significance; and, helping people to see that our lives are moving toward an ultimate fulfillment.

When we begin following Jesus, God re-oriens our lives. Christians perceive the world differently, and God has given us a parish family for support in a world with mistaken priorities. Sure we still get confused, and sometimes we go seeking fulfillment in the wrong places, sometimes we distort Christian faith by making the little things into big things and the big things into little things, but a healthy Christian community helps us to turn around, to come back home to the basics, to return to what is most meaningful, most needful.

One of the ways a community stays focused on the big picture is by talking about God, talking about our experiences of God, sharing good news. Our role and responsibility as Christians is to call attention to Christ, to help one another see Christ's presence.

Tom Long, who teaches preaching, makes this analogy:

Imagine a society in which music were illegal. In this society, it would be against the law to sing, to listen to music, to harbor a musician in one's home, or even to quote lyrics of a song. Undoubtedly, there would soon be a revolution in such a society, because a law against music would be more than just an unwelcome irritation; it would be a moral outrage, a crime against the human spirit. Human beings don't just enjoy music; we need music to be human, and we cannot be fully human if we cannot make music. In the same way, Christians know that we cannot be fully human without speaking the truth about life and about ourselves, which is grounded in the truth about God. Even if every person in the world were already a Christian, we would still need to talk about God in the same way that a mariner needs to talk about

the sea. We would need to talk about God to be truthful, to be whole, for life to be full.³

We talk our way to belief. Talking about God helps our trust in him grow, clarify, and deepen. “Putting things into words is one of the ways we acquire knowledge, passion, and conviction.” Long says that his seminary students will often struggle writing their first sermons, saying “I know what I believe. I just can’t say it!” That was my experience. But he says, “Unless you can say it, you don’t really believe it.” Long calls it “talking ourselves into being Christians.”

So we talk about God for our own spiritual well-being, but it also can help others – other Christians as well as non-Christians. When we tell our stories of God, our experiences of him to other Christians, we help each other become more aware of God’s presence in our lives, how he works, how he’s transformed our lives. When we tell our experience of God to non-Christians, we commit evangelism.

We all know that Jesus wants us to talk about him, about good news, but evangelism fills me with anxiety, and I suspect that I’m not the only one who feels that way. It’s much easier to be silent about Jesus. Many of us may fear to talk about God, faith. We don’t fear some external threat. This isn’t Saudi Arabia. We’re not going to be put in prison for talking about Jesus.

Indeed, most Americans identify as Christians. Most may even go to church. But our faith is profoundly counter-cultural. It puts us in conflict with other people. We don’t want to share something intimate, important to us, and possibly make someone else feel uncomfortable. We don’t want to risk rejection, feeling alone. It’s usually more comfortable for us to keep our faith private, secret, hidden. But that may also stunt it.

Sure, we may cringe when we hear people talk about faith. So often it seems that people who do talk about faith are using Jesus to clobber the other guy over the head, to feel superior. If we really want to share our faith, if we want to be heard, we have to want relationship with people – with or without faith, to respect them, to understand them, to empathize with them, to imagine life in their shoes. If we want to be heard, we can’t use Christian jargon and focus on minutiae, churchy things. If we want to be heard, we have to be willing to share something of our inner life and risk rejection.

The name Simon comes from the Hebrew word meaning “heard.” Simon was Andrew’s brother. They worked together with their father. Presumably the brothers had a relationship of respect and trust – a solid basis upon which to hear one another. Andrew met Jesus, who invited him to “come and see.” Andrew followed him. Then Andrew went to Simon and told him his experience

of Jesus; told Simon that Jesus was the Messiah; and then brought Simon to Jesus.

Jesus called Simon “Cephas,” that is Peter, or rock, stone. Peter, of course, wasn’t always a rock. He wasn’t always solidly reliable and faithful. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter had tried to correct Jesus, to tell him how to be the Messiah. At Gethsemane, when his friend is in anguish, he couldn’t stay up and watch with Jesus. At Jesus’ trial, Peter denied Jesus three times. But Peter became the rock of the church. We see that Peter grew into his calling.

Perhaps we can identify with Peter and see that growth happening in our own lives too, that God is making us, shaping us, healing us. Recall how you came to Christ. Why did you hear him? Who invited you? What made him attractive? Whatever did is probably attractive to other people too. And I find it helpful to think about what’s happened to me as I’ve followed him, to think about how we’ve learned to trust him more fully, to thank God for it. We may not be rocks... yet. We will be. We’re each a work in progress.

In today’s gospel, Peter transforms – Simon to Peter, fisher to fisher of men, someone drifting on the seas of chaos and darkness to following Jesus who gives order and light to life. Peter’s transformation continues throughout the gospels and through Acts. God gives him growth. The Peter in Acts seems, in ways, almost unrecognizable from his beginnings we heard today.

Peter became a hero, one of the most important people in history. But it wouldn’t have happened if one of Jesus’ disciples hadn’t told him about discovering the Messiah. Faith begins with an invitation. The good news is that every one of us can offer the invitation: come and see.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Peter Gomes, *The Bible and the Good Life*, William Morrow and Company, Inc. (1996), p. 179.

² David Brooks, "Social Animal," *The New Yorker*, January 17, 2011.

³ Tom Long, *Testimony*, Jossey-Bass (2004), pp. 5-6.