

The Second Sunday of Epiphany – Year B
St. James Lutheran Church, Brogue, PA
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Let us pray.

May our ears tingle and our hearts burn within us as your will for our lives is revealed through your Holy Word and the message we are about to hear. Amen.

Attending seminary I find that I am immersed in books, most of which are not of my choosing. So it is a real treat for me when I can pick a book to read just for fun. One such book by David Gregory is *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger: An Invitation worth Considering*. In my life, worthwhile invitations never came from perfect strangers. In fact, from the time we are children if a stranger approaches us, we are taught to run the other way.

I have received invitations that I felt were worth considering. Some are written invitations to birthdays, graduations, weddings, anniversaries or retirements. These occasions are usually filled with joy and celebration.

At times I find myself a bit apprehensive about accepting an invitation if the availability of alcohol extends much beyond the celebratory toast or two. I'm not a prude I just get uncomfortable when people drink too much. In such situations, when possible, Allan and I simply make an early exit.

I also receive invitations face to face, by email or over the telephone from friends and family saying, "let's get together." Depending who it's from it may be for a meal and fellowship, or if it's a girlfriend it might be to go shopping. I've also received invitations to attend retreats, sporting events and to visit family in other states. For the most part invitations usually bring a sense of anticipation, excitement, joy and laughter into my life.

In today's Gospel lesson, Nathanael is extended an invitation from his friend Philip to "Come and See." "Come and See" the One about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth. Knowing that the Roman's, who the Jewish people despised, had a military outpost in Nazareth, Nathanael scoffs in response. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Yet despite his stereotypical mind and doubt he goes and encounters the One, who he will call "the Son of God" and the "King of Israel."

Over two thousand years ago, the evangelical invitation to "Come and See" the chosen Son of God was extended first by God's angels to shepherds in a field, then by John the Baptist. Jesus himself told his first followers to "come and see."

Something was happening that was so exciting that sibling went to sibling as Andrew did to his brother Peter and friend went to friend as Philip went to Nathanael. Eventually the excitement was so great that billions of people would come to see Jesus as the Son of God, our Lord and Savior.

What has happened to this excitement?

Too often we feel that following the invitation to “come and see” will cramp our lifestyle—that it is boring and has too many “rules” that will get in the way of living life the way we want to live it. We forget or perhaps we never knew that God made all things declaring them good and when God made humanity God said, “It is very good.” In our ignorance, we greedily take the gifts that God declared good and use them in excess. The goodness intended by God is lost in our abuse and the result is humanities broken-ness revealed in obesity, alcoholism, drug addiction, pollution, pornography, etc., etc.

Whenever, we do something that is harmful or hurtful to our selves or others we are not living as God intended. By NOT living as God intended we separate ourselves from God and from healthy relationships with one another. I have found that God’s desire for our lives is far from boring. If we are open to it, it is greater than our wildest imagination! God invites us into a life giving relationship but does not force us to follow God’s ways. We have the ability to make choices.

Some of those choices drown out God’s invitation and cause us to harden our hearts. In so doing we refuse to listen. Samuel was a young person—a student who lived in the house of God since he was three years old but he needed the help of an experienced mentor, Eli to help him realize that it was indeed God who was calling him.

When God called, what did Samuel hear? Something boring that would cramp his style? Hardly! Samuel heard something that made his ears tingle, something that would make the ears of others tingle. Samuel listened and responded to God’s Words and his life was changed forever. Samuel served as a messenger for God.

God’s Word in Psalm 139 tells us that God had an image of us before our bodies were formed in our mother’s womb. God is with us and knows all about what we do and say. God knows when we ignore God’s voice calling us, inviting us to make different choices. God remains with us even in those negative choices.

God’s Word is spelled out clearest for us in the Gospel of John. God’s Word and invitation to a renewed relationship with God is Jesus Christ. “Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life.” (John 14.6) God’s Word, the Bible, is NOT meant to be used as a weapon to beat us into submission. God’s Word brings life not death.

The image of angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, destroys the image of Jacobs ladder found in Genesis chapter 28 where the ladder was the way to reach God. No longer do we have to try to earn our way to God using our own strength and means to climb the ladder a rung at a time. That’s exhausting and no matter how hard we try it cannot be done. God knows that and uses the Cross of Christ as a bridge to restore us to a right relationship. Through our baptism we are baptized into the life and death of Jesus Christ. God gives us the promise of new life, eternal life.

I think this is part of the problem. We don't want to wait to receive our reward we want it now. The reality is we rob ourselves and cheat God when we see eternal life with God as something we wait to live after death. Eternal life with God begins with our Baptism! It is something we are called to live out every day of our earthly lives as children of God.

Failing to live a life without the love of Christ burning within our hearts to me is death—a living death. But when we remain open and eager to hear God's Word not only will it tingle our ears, it may cause our eyes to mist up as our hearts overflow with the joy and love God intended for us through Jesus Christ but that's just the beginning!

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we are failing miserably in our call. We are cheating ourselves and others by ignoring God's invitation. As children of God, God is with us at all times and in all places walking us through the trials of life. Can you see God's presence in the people around you? Have you experienced God's presence? God's steadfast love is unchanging but it is not stagnate. God's love calls us to heed the invitation to "Make disciples of all nations."

We are ALL called to extend the invitation to "Come and See" to our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, friends, neighbors and co-workers. These are not strangers to us. They are people we know and hold in our hearts, our thoughts and our prayers. Some of us may have the gifts to share the invitation with strangers in the grocery store line or in a far away land. The truth is we don't have to argue anyone into believing. That's the gift of the Holy Spirit. All we are called to do as co-workers in God's earthly kingdom is to issue the invitation to "Come and See." In failing to do so, I believe we selfishly hoard the love of God for ourselves.

Today marks the birthday of civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He is probably most famous for his "I Have a Dream" speech, which he delivered in 1963 from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Dr. King said, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I too have a dream—that one-day God's people will heed God's invitation to live as people of God and in so doing "live out the true meaning of the creed we confess." I dream that the time is now for all of us to stop dampening the power of the Holy Spirit, and live as though we truly have the love of God burning within each of us through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ.

In "Discerning Your Congregation's Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach, Roy Oswald and Robert Friedrich, Jr. note that part of this involves recalling God's faithfulness in the past. Not just to reminisce or wallow in past glories; but as a step in trusting God for even greater things in the future. They share this story:

While one of them was serving a 100-year-old congregation, a mission congregation began less than two miles away. Within about five years, the mission congregation had grown larger than the 100-year-old church and completed a building program, which they expanded just a few years later. A major difference between the two congregations was that the "mission church" was looking ahead to the greater things God was going to do

with their congregation. The "established church" tended to look to the past at the good things God had done for the congregation. Even though when members of century-old congregation were asked, "Are the best years of the congregation ahead of them or behind them?" they answered "ahead," that wasn't the way they talked or acted about their future.

We need to be expectant of what God can and will do in our lives! God has called ordinary imperfect and sinful people to bring glory to God's name throughout the history of the Bible. Jesus calls ordinary imperfect and sinful people to invite others –that includes you and me—to "Come and See."

Isn't it time we all stopped merely dreaming and started living out God's Word in the way it was intended? As a Word, that brings joy, peace and excitement to our lives. If we truly have the courage to follow Jesus, I believe we're in for the ride of our life. If you don't believe me, "Come and See." Amen.