

Isaiah 49: 1-7
I Corinthians 1: 1-9
John 1: 29-42

Invitation
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Yesterday was my son Willy's birthday. A couple of weeks ago, he posted an invitation to his birthday party on facebook. He created an event named "Intergalactic Mission Training Program: Birthday Module." It featured a Soviet-era poster of a cosmonaut holding a hammer and sickle, and gave a DJ schedule for music for the evening under the heading "Loud sounds by HQ's delegation to the disco nebula":

9ish-10ish: Starfleet Commander Haas
10ish-11ish: Quantum Sound Mechanic Wilzart
11ish-12ish: Planetary Groove Architect Kel Bel
12ish-Infinity: Dance Battle on Planet Funkzor

This is a pretty specific sort of invitation, with it's own language and in-jokes, but it was posted for all of Will's Facebook friends to see: all 564 of them. Some percentage of that number will be charmed, captivated and inspired by the invitation, and decide to attend. I get to view it from afar, from the East Coast, and admire its style....without having to actually engage in the dance battle on the planet Funkzor.

All of this got me thinking about invitations: spoken, written, posted and otherwise expressed. I might get a wedding invitation in the mail, beautifully designed and engraved. There is an expectation that I will RSVP, and perhaps purchase a present for the couple, joining a larger circle of friends and family. I start thinking about what I will wear to the event. Every Sunday, I invite all of you, especially visitors, to come to coffee hour. On Communion Sundays, when we recite our local church covenant, I invite you, as a group, to stand. Some of you may have been invited, by our nominating committee, to join a Board of the church or to take on some other role. In most cases, an invitation presupposes a relationship or shared interest, however slight or tenuous. An invitation implies opportunity for deepening a relationship. And it implies choice on the part of the hearer, an RSVP of "yes, I'd love to" or "regretfully decline."

In this season of Epiphany, we hear stories from the Bible about Jesus' early life, his character, the beginning of his ministry. Last week, we heard Matthew's version of his baptism by John at the Jordan River. This gave us a glimpse of his personal epiphany, his striking sense of identity and purpose. We allowed that his epiphany to spark our own insights into our identity and mission. This is what Scripture invites us to do: to draw a line from an ancient, perhaps unique, experience to our contemporary lives, and then to learn something.

This week, we get another take, another version of those events at the Jordan, courtesy of the Gospel of John. The language and the narrative are quite different here. The first chapter of John's Gospel juxtaposes huge cosmic claims with rather underwhelming, meandering actions. Profound poetry, describing Jesus as Messiah, as the Word made flesh, as Light, as grace and truth, as the Lamb of God, is spoken. Then we get a picture of a lot of men milling around by the side of a river, some following John, then turning and following Jesus, answering questions with other questions.

This is how the career of the eternal Word begins? With this kind of dialogue, with this kind of disciple, with this kind of invitation?

In this Gospel, Jesus' first words are a question to people who have changed direction to follow him: "What are you looking for?" This is more than a casual request about why they walking in the same general direction as him. The question deals with the basic human need that causes people to turn towards God. And the reply of those two disciples is also more than an offhand responsive question. The human being wishes to know where the divine is staying or dwelling or abiding (as we used to translate that word): we are constantly seeking to find something lasting and meaningful. Jesus answers that question with invitation: "Come and see." Both of those verbs are used elsewhere in this Gospel to describe the workings of faith. The text tells us that they came and saw where he was staying and stayed with him. This seemingly casual and meandering conversation is actually the description of a conversion experience, the beginning of a pilgrimage of faith that will lead them to new dwellings and new insights.

"Where are you staying?" Andrew and his friend do not seem to be asking who Jesus is, or what his plans are. But they are trying to get to the root of things. Their question implies "Where do you live? How do you live? What is it that sustains you? What gives you life?" None of those questions can be answered with words only. Whether it is abiding or staying or dwelling or remaining or residing, it will take some time. Jesus seems to understand the questions behind the question. He offers an open-ended answer. "Come and see" is an invitation to relationship. The invitation is immediately accepted: they came and saw and stayed. Their discipleship began, not with information or correct beliefs, but a willingness to spend time in community.

What prepared those two or three people to hear this invitation? We know that they were already disciples of John the Baptist. Like him, they were eager for someone or something to happen. Their history, and the history of their people prepared them to be searchers. Their Scriptures helped them keep alive the hope that lives in the human heart- the hope that sustains through exile, famine and oppression, through pain and loss and disillusionment. Their hope had the name "Messiah." Their longing was focused, their seeking was focused, on a person who would do a new thing, and repair a world of sin and aimlessness.

John himself prepared those few people to hear an invitation. He called Jesus the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Now, we could spend hours trying to understand that title. In fact, people have spent centuries asking, "How, exactly, does the Lamb of God take away the sin of the world?" This is where most theologians start talking about atonement and sacrifice. But here is what it actually says in Greek: Jesus "lifts up" the sin of the cosmos. I think of this as Jesus making sin more visible, Jesus revealing sin for what it really is, Jesus revealing, right up through his death and resurrection, the "wrongness" of oppression, the evil of prejudice, the shocking wickedness of killing the non-violent teacher. He lifts that sin up, so that it is plain to see, so that humanity can come, see, and choose another way.

In this context, the simple invitation, "Come and see," becomes a real challenge. True, there are no pre-conditions. Jesus does not say, "Do you accept these rules, will you swear this oath, will you sign here on the dotted line." But, be prepared, if you come and see where Jesus is staying, for some eye-opening experiences, some mind-changing experiences. It is a gracious, kind invitation, but it is truly a call into relationship. It turns out that Jesus is staying with those who are wounded and weak, and revealing a heart of kindness. He stays with the powerful too, and shows them where

they have taken a wrong turn. He stays with outcasts, and reveals hospitality. He stays with the hungry, and uncovers a banquet.

Which leads me to our invitations and our seeking. When we invite people to join us in worship and in community life, do we have anything to reveal, anything to offer that will build relationships and change lives? Do we offer a sense of vocation and shared ministry, something worth staying for? Do we offer the bread of life along with the potluck meal? Do we offer a place where transformation can happen? When we invite people in, or invite people to a deeper commitment, what will they find when they come and see?

On this weekend, when we remember Martin Luther King, Jr, we can remember the way his invitation into a movement was also a ministry of revealing and uncovering the sin of his world. He called attention to the toxic divisions between races, cultures, religions, and nations. He famously pointed out that the most segregated hour in America is Sunday morning, when many Americans are in worship, in separate churches, separated by race, class, and denomination. With these revelations came a dream and a mission of justice and peace. If one responded to the invitation, one was drawn into a life of new relationships, new priorities, new opportunities, and the possibility of grace.

I believe that each congregation has a unique gift, a unique ministry in its own setting, where it “abides” in the world. We may begin, as did those people by the Jordan River 2000 years ago, with a faith tradition that makes us restless, hopeful seekers. We hear that existential question, “What are you looking for?” In this place of sanctuary and transformation, the question echoes between us and among us. We ask Jesus, our teacher in faith, “Where are you staying, where do you dwell?” Over and over again, the gracious invitation is offered, “Come and see.” Come and see me dwelling in your neighbor, come and see me on the road. Come and see where you are needed. Come and see the pain of the world. Come and see a community where your gifts will be used and will bloom and multiply.

I am not quite as creative as my son with invitations. I haven’t got a poster from the 60’s or a line up of DJs from the disco nebula or a lot of quirky nicknames for the band members. I would not dream of inviting you to a dance battle on any planet. My invitation to you is simpler...and more complex. It echoes those old questions, which we must answer for our time. What are you looking for? Maybe you will find it here, with us. Where are you staying? Tell me your story, give me your wisdom. Then, together we can hear the Teacher’s voice, Come and see. Together with Andrew we can come and see and stay and say, “We have found the Messiah!” Thanks be to God.