

It's All About Verbs

Matthew 4:12-23

We are in the period of the Christian calendar known as Epiphany, which notes the turning of God's face toward us. The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, which means "appearing." It carries the idea of manifestation. Epiphany glows with the light of God's countenance appearing through Christ to illuminate our darkness and show us Divine purpose and grace.

In our reading this morning, Matthew ties Jesus directly to the prophesy of Isaiah and cloaks him in the imagery of light. Then we see Jesus select his first four disciples – Peter, Andrew, James, and John. These are epiphanous events, serving to remind us that these "light moments" can still appear to brighten our world.

The night has always been potentially hostile. Walking in the dark can be a fearful experience. At night thieves and murderers ply their trade, and drug dealers and merchants in human flesh do their business. With modern times came artificial light and much of our surroundings became illuminated. We go many places now at night without much fear. It makes it difficult, though, for us to appreciate the way night was perceived in earlier times. For hundreds of centuries people illuminated their houses and work places with fire. It was not until William Murdock invented the gaslight in 1803 that large areas could be lit up after dark. Before that people literally walked in darkness.

During the time in which the Bible was written, people knew the meaning of darkness. Thus, when the biblical writers proclaimed that the people who walked in darkness had seen a great light, they were talking of something vivid, dramatic, and hopeful. When they spoke of Christ as the light of the world, they were ascribing to him the ability to transform their world from one of darkness and despair into one of hope and joy. We need to understand the true darkness of their world to appreciate the words of Psalm 27:1 in today's Call to Worship: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?"

One of the most dramatic examples of lighting the darkness I have ever experienced occurred at Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. The ranger led our group deep into the large cave. Electric lights strung along the pathway revealed the secrets of the cave that had long been shrouded in darkness. Upon reaching a broad open area within the cave, the ranger stopped the group and told us it was time for us to experience what total darkness was really like. And then he turned off all the lights. I literally could not see my hand in front of my face. It was an eerie feeling. I didn't dare take even one step. The longer the lights were off the more my anxiety grew. As we stood there in unseeing emptiness, some in the group began to exhibit the first stirrings of panic. Finally, the ranger lit one ordinary wooden match and the cave exploded into light. The many oohs and aahs attested to the group's wonderment at how much light could flood out from one match. Light appeared and it was a very welcome sight. The people who stood in darkness had seen a great light.

God brought light into a darkened world when Jesus began his ministry. An eternal flame was lit in Bethlehem long ago and it continues to burn unabated.

As an old sailor and navigator I was used to the North Star being the center of much of my existence. It lies about 45 degrees up in the northern sky. All the constellations move throughout the hours of the night, rotating like the hands of a giant clock around that one fixed light, the North Star. They move, but it seems to remain stationary. That is why sailors throughout the centuries have used the North Star to steer in the right direction across endless miles of empty seas. It is always a reliable point of reference. The North Star does rise and drop about 23 degrees in relation to the horizon between summer and winter. But while everything else in the heavens shuffle around, it basically stands still.

That is how I think of Christ. We shuffle around, but Christ is always there. And as we try to navigate across the roiling seas of our own lives, Christ is a reliable point of reference, if we but take the time to view him, chart him, and follow him. That lone star is always there, eternally radiating light.

A basic law of physics says that an object in motion remains in motion until something acts upon it to slow it down, or to stop it. Writer Leo Buscaglia suggested a corollary to that law. People with static lives, he said, tend to continue in that pattern until something or someone awakens them to the possibility of a wasted life. I like his idea and we have all seen it happen to someone, perhaps even us.

Those times of awakening are epiphanous flashes of light that illuminate our minds and stimulate our spirits to exciting living. They became available to the disciples, a most unlikely group of people. In fact, a recent archaeological discovery unearthed a remarkable ancient memorandum regarding the disciples. It reads as follows:

From: Jordan Management Consultants, Inc.

To: Jesus, son of Joseph, Woodcrafter's Carpenter Shop, Nazareth

Dear Sir,

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the twelve men you have selected for management positions within your new organization. All of them have taken our battery of tests and we have run the results through our computer.

It is our staff's opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in the proper background for the type of work you are undertaking. We recommend you search for persons with proven managerial ability. To be more specific: Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and his brother Andrew does not possess leadership qualities. Both James and John place personal interests above company loyalty. Thomas has a questioning attitude that would undermine morale. Matthew has been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. Thaddaeus and James register high on the manic-depressive scale.

One of the candidates does, however, show great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, and has a keen business mind. He is highly motivated as well as being ambitious and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man.

Fortunately, Jesus ignored the advice of Jordan Management Consultants and used his own judgment in selecting his disciples. Perhaps the consultants would have recommended that we too not be considered. Yet, Jesus also calls us to be his disciples.

What is important about the call of the disciples was that they were not called to follow a philosophy of life, nor a creed of conduct. They were called to follow a person – Jesus of Nazareth. Our call is also to follow Jesus, to be committed to him as a person. In the gospels it is the *person* of Jesus that shines through – what he believed, what he said, what he did, his courage, his compassion, his zeal and his honesty for and about the Kingdom. If we follow Jesus as a person, the philosophy of life and creed of conduct will take care of themselves. We are not redeemed by a creed or a philosophy, but by a person. And that person is Jesus our Lord.

Averill Harriman, who was at one time the U.S. representative at many European conferences, was asked about his command of the French language. He said, "My French is excellent, except for the verbs." It was an engaging bit of self-deprecation. But his description of his difficulty with verbs has a wholly unintended relation to our religion. Many people would say, or have it said about them, that their "religion is excellent, except for the verbs." The adjectives are right: holy, sacred, noble. The nouns are all right, for they know and pronounce the proper nouns: God, Christ, Spirit, as well as common nouns like faith, salvation, redemption, forgiveness. But the verbs are rather weak or absent. The Christian faith is centered in verbs. Jesus said, "You know these things. Happy are you if you *do* them."

It's all about verbs. Ours is a religion of verbs. The first book of Christian history is appropriately called *The Acts of the Apostles*. It chronicles not only the thoughts and meditations of the apostles, but their acts, their deeds. Beyond that the gospel message is the story of the *acts* of God. It has verbs in it. "God so *loved* the world that he *gave* his only begotten Son." Jesus invitation to the disciples had great verbs in them: "If any would *come* after me, let him *take up* his cross and *follow* me."

Jesus call to the disciples was not an intellectual one. It was a call to action. Either stay where you are in a closed world doing the same thing, or put it aside and follow me. Either stay in your world of darkness or come with me into the light. But Jesus didn't just call the disciples to walk with him. He

called them to reflect his light to others. That is Christ's call to us as well, to bring light into other people's darkness. He is the fixed light that we can trust and rely upon in this rapidly changing world. We are to espouse our faith by the adjectives and nouns. We are to live in Christ by the verbs. That is our Lord's call to us and that is our task. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 23 January 2011