

Inviting Speech

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
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In the Name of God: Creator, Christ, and Spirit. Amen.

Some of you will recall that last week's readings led us into a consideration of prophetic speech. Our readings this morning invite similar consideration, not in regard to prophecy now but in regard to inviting speech. Let's look at the ancient lessons quickly and then ponder their meaning in the present moment.

Our first lesson comes from Isaiah, a text frequently read at ordinations. It records a vision. The Lord is on his throne and is surrounded by divine creatures who endlessly offer hymns of praise. The observer knows himself to be on holy ground and he immediately understands that he has no business there. Nonetheless, one of the divine creatures places a live coal on his lips; God has called him to speak his word in the world.

The word that Isaiah ends up speaking is an inviting word. You know the old definition of the prophetic call – to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Isaiah will do both but, in time, finally speak a word of astounding comfort to an alienated and exiled people. He will invite them to hold on to hope, to believe that the Lord knows of their plight and is acting to liberate them and redeem their situation. You can see why this text is so often read at ordinations – that is the call of pastors and, today I assert, of all the baptized.

Saint Paul echoes this theme in his letter to the Corinthians. He recounts the details of his call to ministry. Many others preceded him – Peter, the twelve, more than five hundred brothers and sisters, James, all the apostles. And then, finally, Christ comes to Paul – “as to one untimely born.” But, in the Kingdom, the first are often last and the last first. No one will work harder than Paul to speak God's inviting word to the whole Mediterranean world.

The word he speaks is straightforward, simple. Christ died for our sins in accordance with scripture. He was buried and then raised on the third day. His life, death, and resurrection bring salvation. Paul will spend the remainder of his life inviting people to accept the free gift of divine grace and live in peace, no longer beset by the burden of sin or haunted by the threat of death.

And then Jesus, in the gospel, tells his friends that they will spend their lives doing exactly the same thing. After the miracle of the extraordinary catch, he shrugs off its significance and links that deed of power to his larger mission – it's

not about fish but people. His disciples will become fisher-folk indeed but they will catch kindred for the Kingdom, not mackerel for the market.

These readings, taken together, remind us that the call of the past remains the call of the present. You and I are to be about the Lord's business, speaking the inviting word of God to people who are aching to hear it and mostly unconscious of their need. Those of us who work here get a huge kick out of Deedra Hardman – without going out of her way, she's probably invited over one hundred people to worship with us over the years. She listens and, if someone expresses a spiritual need, she tells them about Saint Paul's. Nothing could be more normal or natural for her.

But that's not the only way. You might remember the Franciscan dictum – preach the gospel always, when necessary use words. One act of loving service has as much inviting power as a thousand words sincerely offered. I suspect that many Episcopalians feel more at home in this arena, praying that their good deeds might inspire someone else to look into the source and purpose of the self-giving life.

And then there's a third way that I'd like to hold up for you this morning. This way has to do with inviting people into the experience of wonder and meaning. I've been thinking about this third path all week, ever since reading a vignette the theologian Michael Battle shares.

He writes, One day a young woman was invited to go rock climbing. Although she was very scared, she went with her group to a tremendous granite cliff. She mustered up great courage as she put on the gear, took hold of the rope, and gained traction to climb the great rock. She had to stop on the edge, to catch her breath. As she was hanging on the edge, the safety rope snapped against Brenda's eye, knocking out her contact lens. She dangled on a rock ledge with hundreds of feet below her and hundreds of feet above her!

Frantically, she looked on the edge of the rock for her lens, but it just wasn't there. Eventually, her team helped her make it to the top of the rock. She sat down, despondent, with the others of the party, waiting for the rest of them to make it up the face of the cliff. She wondered how she would get back down. Then a new team of climbers met the young woman and her team. One of them shouted out, "Hey, you guys! Anybody lose a contact lens?" It turns out that an ant was moving slowly across the face of the rock, carrying the lens on its back.

So that's Michael's story. Let me suggest that this tale is an invitation into the Kingdom. This is a story we can share with friends and ponder together. What do we make of it? How do we understand it? Random chance? Happy

circumstance? Good luck? Providence? Divine intervention? Serendipity? All of the above? Who can say for sure?

Speaking personally, I see it as an invitation into mystery and meaning. What, I ask myself, does this story suggest about the nature of life in general and about the spiritual life in particular. For me, an event is often less significant than the meaning I attribute to it. I think that's true for many. Brenda's father, for instance, was a cartoonist. When she told him what happened, he drew a picture of the ant with the contact lens on his back; the caption read as follows: "Lord, I don't know why you want me to carry this thing. I can't eat it, and it's awfully heavy. But if this is what You want me to do, I'll do it for You."

Michael Battle comments, "I think it would do us some good to say, 'God, I don't know why you want me to love my enemies, to forgive, to be generous, or to welcome a stranger. I can see no good in it and it's awfully heavy. But if you want me to love like you, I will.'"

Is that an awareness into which we can invite friends? Does that shift in consciousness bring healing and relief to weary souls, souls worn out by excessive self-concern? And might we take it even a step further? What if Brenda's contact lens never reappeared? No ant, no lens, no cartoon, just blurred vision. Would the story be less dramatic, less compelling, if she got down the mountain the same way she got up – with the aid and assistance, the care and comfort, of her mountain climbing friends?

Perhaps that's the Kingdom that God is inviting us all into – a place where we can take chances, embark on new adventures, and trust the Lord and the people of God to be with us, even in moments of panic and despair. I suspect that if we tell that story with any warmth, if we extend that invitation with any sincerity, we'll find more than a few souls ready to take us up on it. Indeed, I suspect our nets will be full and bursting. Amen.