

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 23, 2011

“The people who have walked in deep darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined.” Those words always conjure up for me the wonderful bass aria in Part One of Handel’s Messiah. Handel had a marvelous way of making his music express the meaning of the words and if you know that particular aria, you can feel the impact of that light rising out of the darkness to shine on the people who have been so long in the deep gloom of sin and death.

Epiphany is the season of light. Even after all the Christmas lights have been put away for another year, we are still living in a season of light. But it isn’t decorative light like the lights of Christmas, but rather light which leads, which guides, which lights a pathway. A light which the sages followed to Bethlehem. A light which led Andrew and Peter and the other disciples to Jesus. A light which has been a beacon for millions of lives. A light which shines on the pathways of our own lives.

When we think about lighted pathways, what do we picture? Is it something sort of like one of Thomas Kincaid’s rather sentimental paintings which are so popular. A winding path leading to a country cottage, the whole scene lit by diffuse light which makes the picture glow, exuding feelings of comfort and hominess. Well, that’s a lovely picture, but that isn’t at all what is meant when we talk about Epiphany light.

Yes, there is a lighted pathway, but it leads toward something or somewhere we really can’t see very well, something which holds out a promise, “the assurance of things hoped for” as the letter to Hebrews tells us. And in order to find that promise, that hope, we must follow that lighted pathway. We can’t just admire the painting with its sense of comfort and hominess. We must actually get into

the picture and move along the path. We can't move into and stay in the pretty rose-covered cottage. We must pass it and keep moving along the lighted path which leads into the undefined distance.

Jesus said, "Follow me." Now as you well know, follow is an action verb. So to follow means we have to move in some way. We can't just sit back comfortably (either literally or figuratively). Something has to happen in order to follow. It's simply impossible to follow a person or an idea or a path or whatever and remain passive. The body, the mind, the heart, the soul--one or all must move in some way or following can't happen.

Following is tough for many of us. We'd really prefer to go the Thomas Kincaid route, staying in our comfortable little cottage which is our rose-covered world and not mess with that big, dirty real world out there with all its pain and suffering. Let's face it, it's a lot easier to simply verbalize our faith than it is to translate our faith into a verb--into action. Most of us would probably find it much more comfortable to worship Jesus rather to follow him. That is something much more attuned to the worldly wisdom of our age and much safer to do. Yet Jesus never says anything about worshiping him. He only says to follow him.

But to follow Jesus is no easy task. To follow Jesus means being willing to learn to listen more carefully and discern more keenly what God is telling us. It means being willing to be open to change, willing to make strong stands about justice issues, willing to take risks to demonstrate our faith. It means being willing to obey without question God's will for us and the world. It means being willing to trust in God's ability to provide us with all we need for our well-being.

Tough words to hear. Tough words to act on. So what might make them a bit easier to deal with? Maybe we need a different image of

God to help us with this whole following thing. Have you ever considered God as a verb rather than a noun? Mary Daly, a feminist theologian teaching at Boston College in the 70's and 80's says, "Why indeed must 'God' be a noun? Why not a verb....the most active and dynamic of all? That needn't mean repudiating the personal attributes of God. In fact, it should open up a whole new dimension of thinking about God--the moving, changing, developing, growing God whose way we follow as we too move, change, develop and grow." If we think of God this way, following becomes a shared experience and shared experiences usually make an action less intimidating, less scary, less overwhelming.

Jesus didn't just tell one person to follow him. First two, then two more, then the twelve, plus a few women, and then many more as he went about the countryside. And they told others and together, after his death, they kept alive the light of his earthly ministry and brought more and more people into a new relationship with God. That is still the call we hear from Jesus. Follow me and bring someone along with you.

As so often happens when I am preaching on a very familiar theme, I have difficulty finding something new and worthwhile to say. I mentioned to a retired Methodist minister that I could use some help with this story of fishing for people. What might he suggest. To which he quickly responded, "Tell 'em to use good bait!"

Now, I know very little about fishing. I prefer to have no personal relationship with what I eat! But I do know that one uses different sorts of bait depending on what one is hoping to catch. So my friends, what you choose to use as bait is entirely up to you. The call, however, has never changed. Jesus still calls each of us to help bring people who dwell in deep darkness into the light. It is only through us, as Jesus followers, that the Epiphany light can shine out into the darkness of this world. AMEN

