

Isaiah 49:1-7

¹Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. ²He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. ³And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." ⁴But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God." ⁵And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength— ⁶he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." ⁷Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

John 1:29-42

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ³¹I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³²And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." ³⁵The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Evangelism: What's Your Angle?

In the spring of 1999, Hyesun was accepted into NYU graduate school. We were living in Virginia at the time, and we quickly starting planning our big move north. To be honest I was a little nervous about moving to New York, and I asked some of my colleagues at work for some advice. I remember one of them saying, "Matt, you need an *angle*. Everyone in New York seems

to have an angle, so you should definitely have an *angle* when you live in New York.” My friend had probably heard that expression used in some of the popular crime dramas set in New York. An angle is an approach to a particular subject: a detective has an angle; a con artist has an angle; a lawyer has an angle. I appreciated his advice, though I don’t know if I’ve really acquired any angle at all since I’ve been here.

What’s your angle on evangelism? Evangelism is a rather touchy subject in many churches. I’ll be honest: I get a bit uncomfortable whenever I prepare the annual church report for our charge conference and I come to that question about our church’s ministry in the area of evangelism. All sorts of images and memories come to mind – images and memories of people I have gone out of my way to avoid, people who call themselves “evangelists.” As I’ve pondered our ministry of evangelism here at Bethel, I’ve asked myself if that kind of ministry is what my supervisors are expecting of me, of us. The image we so often have of an evangelist is not one we’re fond of, and it makes us wonder if there’s something wrong with our faith that we avoid behaving like the self-proclaimed evangelists.

In a great sermon entitled “Who Wants to Be an Evangelist?”¹ the Rev. Pam Driesell tells a story of going to a football game at her college and encountering “The Evangelist” – she says the word as if it were the title of a horror movie (*Vincent Price is... The Evangelist!*). Indeed the encounter she describes is horrifying: Outside the football stadium stands a large man who loudly declaring that drunkards are bound for hell. One of the more boisterous drunkards comes up to the man and slurs, “You mean to say I’m going to hell because I drank too many beers?” The Evangelist ignores the inquiry and continues with his diatribe. The drunkard, undeterred, starts taunting the rather large Evangelist, suggesting that the Evangelist too might be hell-bound for the offense of eating too many Big Macs. “What about gluttony, Big Boy?” The Evangelist continues to ignore the unrelenting drunkard. Pam is a self-avowed Christian, and her friends look at her as if to ask for her assessment of what’s happening before them, but Pam is dumbfounded, not sure what to say. At last one of her Jewish friends breaks the ice by saying, “Well you can see why I’m not a Christian.” In her sermon Pam then describes other stereotypical evangelists – the airplane evangelist who happens to sit next to you on the plane and considers it his/her mission to bring you to in-flight public prayer (my version of this is New York Transit evangelist) so you will say the magic words that will ensure that you spend eternity with God and not roasting in hell. While you can successfully evade the football stadium evangelist, you can’t run from the airplane evangelist. Then there’s the college roommate or co-worker evangelist who everyone knows is Christian – everything about the person advertizes that fact. She seems so nice, but if you say or do something that is “unchristian” she looks at you with an expression of cheerful concern and tells you that she’ll “pray for you,” not in the same way you pray for him/her – more like a prayer that someday you will come around to be a “real” Christian, like her.

I tell you, most people I know who encounter these evangelists want *nothing* to do with such people. Adjectives like “brainwashed” or “fanatical” or “self-righteous” are often used to describe these folks. I dare say that these evangelists are much like salesmen. They have a

¹ Sermon found at http://day1.org/5468-who_wants_to_be_an_evangelist

product that they want you to buy, and like salesmen they employ tactics of persuasion – the football stadium evangelist and the airplane evangelist are peddling fear in order to convert you, to save your soul. Like many salesmen they have a script that includes arguments to overcome objections and get you to say “yes,” so they can feel satisfied that they have done their duty for Christ. The college roommate or coworker evangelist is peddling self-righteousness; she is setting the perfect example of behavior and concern that you should copy in order to persuade others that you too are self-righteous. The bottom line is that they all come across as disingenuous, as artificial, as canned, and their disingenuousness repulses the average person. They may tell themselves that they are sharing the good news, but even those who buy their product, who say the magic words, who pray the sinners prayer, are left feeling a bit disappointed in their product. They ask themselves, “Am I really saved?” or “Has anything really changed?” or “Is this all that God wanted from me?” or “Is this how I’m supposed to feel when God accepts me?” It makes you wonder if those who consider themselves evangelists have actually ever had an experience with God, if they actually know Christ, if there’s any substance to that relationship with the divine.

We are currently in the church season known as Epiphany, a word which means God’s revelation or manifestation – God showing up in this world and in our lives. And the lessons we are reading are about people sharing that good news – i.e. *evangelism*. The first evangelists, those who introduce others to Jesus, each have a particular *angle*. Each sees Jesus in slightly different ways, depending on their own experiences and needs and perspectives. John the Baptist has experienced Jesus as “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” – that’s John’s angle. Andrew has experienced Jesus as the chosen one, the Messiah – that’s Andrew’s angle. Philip says Jesus is the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote – that’s Philip’s angle. In our Old Testament reading, Isaiah says the Lord is savior of the world – that’s Isaiah’s angle. Each of these evangelists has experienced the divine in a different way, and they do not argue with one another over whose experience is correct and whose is not. The point is that evangelism is about sharing *YOUR* experience with God, not someone else’s. I would guess that each of you has experiences to share, epiphanies that gave you some new insight into God’s nature and life’s ultimate meaning. I’ve heard some of those stories; they may begin like this:

It was the summer after my father died, and I was walking the beach along the beach at night, and somehow I sensed that he was alive, that he was with me...

I was having a terrible argument with my son, and suddenly I saw myself through his eyes, and I saw how broken I was, how I had failed to live up to both his expectations and my own.

I was singing Christmas carols with some folks from the church, and I felt like time just stopped, I felt like angels somewhere were singing along with us, and the moment could go on forever.

I remember during my first semester of college when I felt so confused about all that I had been taught in church, and I realized that I didn’t believe it anymore, and yet I felt this great assurance that God still loved me and accepted me.

I remember serving beef stew on an outreach mission, and just talking to folks who had nothing, no home, no money, and realizing that I was just like them in every way, and I was so happy to be with them.

Maybe you've experienced Jesus the way John the Baptist did, as the one who takes away your sins and burdens of guilt and shame. Maybe like Andrew you've experienced Jesus as a fulfillment of prophecy who has helped you see yourself as involved in God's plan for this world. Maybe, like a psalmist, you have experienced God as the one and only being who can bring you hope in the midst of horrendous suffering. There are as many variations of epiphanies as there are people in the world. And to the extent that your experiences have shaped you into more loving, more accepting, more compassionate person, you are bearing witness to God's presence in this world. And when you bear witness to God's presence, you are in fact an evangelist, a good evangelist, sharing your own experience of Jesus in an authentic, sincere way – without subjecting that experience to excessive interpretation or reducing it to a doctrine that you can force someone else to embrace. Simple sharing of God's loving presence is the essence of evangelism.

And as you allow your experiences to transform you, Christ's loving presence becomes part of your presence – people see it in you as they saw it in Jesus. And what they saw in Jesus was someone who authentically, compassionately, cared about *them*. See what happens in today's text: when the first two disciples start following Jesus, what does Jesus do? Does he turn around and tell them to pray the sinner's prayer so their souls don't burn in hell? Does he give them a list of beliefs that they must confess in order to be saved? Not exactly. The first thing he did was *beheld* them. He paid attention to them, saw them as individuals. Then he told them who he was and how they must believe in him order to get to heaven, right? Not quite. In fact he didn't *tell* them anything; he *asked* them, "What are you looking for?" This was not a superficial question like, "What do you do?" or "Where did you go to school?" This was a question that got right to the heart of their interest. "What do you seek? What is it you're trying to find?" It's a question that probes the heart, gets beneath the surface, and prompts a thoughtful response. It's a question that requires one asking the question to listen rather than lecture. Evangelism seeks to know, to truly know, the other person, to hear his or her story, and to respond with love and not with canned formulas and condemnation.

I'd like to start a new group in this church; I'll call it EA, Evangelists Anonymous. I think it would benefit folks to have a forum where we can talk about our experiences with God, experiences that have led us to a deeper relationship with Christ, experiences that may defy logical explanation and may be hard to interpret theologically, but *real* experiences and insights that may help us to inspire each other, to encourage one another, and to help us understand the many ways we may experience the divine. Perhaps you have no experiences that you wish to share, and you'd just like to come and listen, to hear others share their stories. If it sounds like a group you'd be interested in, let's talk and we'll figure out a time and place to meet.

The Bible is a wonderful book full of wonderful stories of people's experiences of God, but those are not the same as your own experiences with God. God is just as active in your life as he was in Abraham's life, in Moses' life, in Paul's life, and your experience with God is worth sharing. In sharing it you may save someone's life. You may prompt someone else to share their story. What is your angle? How do you see God? What has he revealed about himself? May God

inspire us to tell our own stories and to listen to one another's that his glory would be fully manifest among us. Amen.