

January 15, 2017

“First Impressions”

by Mary Anne Biggs

Second Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 ~ John 1:29-51

Isn't it nice when a friend introduces you to someone with kind words and compliments? It usually is, but one day I had a really bad cold. My head was congested. My eyes were watering. It seemed like I was talking from the bottom of a well. I was at seminary and the hallway was spinning slowly. I was waiting for my preaching class to begin, and I would have skipped it but it was my turn at bat again. I certainly didn't feel like preaching. I just wanted to get finished and get back to bed. One of my class mates had invited a friend that day. "Oh Katie, I want you to meet my friend Mary Anne," she said to her friend. And added enthusiastically, "Today she'll preach the best sermon you've ever heard!"

I knew she was being kind, but how do you live up to an introduction like that? I wanted to say, "Well, I've got a bad cold." I wanted to say, "Even Ted Williams didn't get a hit every time he came to bat." I wanted to say, "Let me lend you a tape of a sermon by James Forbes; he's a real preacher." What I said was, "I'm so happy to meet you." And I trudged into class hoping that maybe this was the first time Katie had ever heard a sermon in her life ... because that was the only way I was going to preach the best sermon she had ever heard! But you know what? I gave it everything I had that day because my friend believed in me and I wanted to live up to her expectations.

It's always interesting when a friend introduces you to a stranger. You discover something about yourself and about your relationship ... how you are perceived ... what's important about you to your friend. But you also have the pressure of making a good first impression, because we all know how important first impressions are ... how they can set the course of the relationship that follows. It's hard to overcome a bad first impression. So the pressure's on.

In today's gospel John reports Jesus' first meeting with several of his "disciples to be" and their first impression of Jesus. They are introduced by John the baptizer, the first witness to Jesus' special identity. Then they introduce Jesus to each other.

We can all imagine what these encounters were like for these disciples, how in later years they remembered and retold their "the first time I met Jesus" stories a thousand times or more. But I find myself wondering what these introductions meant to Jesus at the time.

A friend gave me a lovely book entitled The Silent Years, by Alan Green. While the scripture describes a process in his becoming ... a dawning awareness for Jesus of what his mission was supposed to be ... in Green's book the author beautifully imagines what the life of the young Jesus may have been like. He posits that if Jesus was indeed human, like the rest of us, that he had to come to grips with who he was over a period of time, through a combination of experiences and education and relationships and critical choices along the way which set his

direction in life. If he was indeed human, like the rest of us, Jesus had some singular identifying moments when something happened ... or somebody said something to him that helped him understand his destiny.

The four gospels indicate that Jesus' baptism by John was *just such* an identifying moment in Jesus' life. Much is made – and much should be made – of the way Jesus received God's approval right from the beginning. We heard last week in Matthew ... and Mark, and Luke also tell us ... that when Jesus was baptized, a Voice from heaven announced, "You are my Son, the beloved; I am well pleased with you." The Voice referenced two passages of Hebrew scripture. Psalm two, a Messianic psalm used when Israel's Kings were anointed and crowned, had the new King announce, "*I will tell of the decree of the Lord, who said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you (Psalm 2:7).'*" This identified Jesus as the Messiah sent by God. And one of the so-called "suffering servant psalms" of Isaiah, which together describe someone who will suffer redemptively on behalf of the people which says, "*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations*" (Isa 42:1). This identified the kind of Messiah that Jesus would be, over and against the widespread expectation of the time that the Messiah would be a violent military leader who would make the blood of the Romans run in the streets. And all four gospels tell us that God's Spirit, in the form of a dove, came down upon Jesus at his baptism. Taken together, the Voice and the Spirit gave Jesus a clear sign of what his mission from God was supposed to be and a clear indication of God's blessing upon him. Jesus did not have to earn God's favor. He always had it. But he still had to choose it. He still had to decide to live by it.

It's not so different for us. You have heard of "original sin," the notion that sin and God's disapproval and God's judgment are somehow passed from generation to generation. That would mean that every child starts behind the eight ball, already rejected by God, already on God's bad side. But I prefer Matthew Fox's concept of "original blessing." Fox gives more weight to God's blessing in Genesis one than God's curse in Genesis three ... and wonders whether we don't all begin this life on God's good side, blessed, not cursed, beloved, not rejected, surrounded already by the grace that God has provided in Christ. Of course, what remains ... what arises every day ... is the CHOICE: do we live out of God's blessing and fulfill our destiny to be the children of God, or do we choose to ignore it, go our own way instead?

Jesus began – as all of us begin – with God's approval, with God's blessing, with God's call. And then his identity was tested. It was tested in the wilderness when he was tempted to abandon the call and take shortcuts to greatness. It was tested by enemies who resisted him and challenged his credentials at every turn. It was tested every day all the way to the cross. But he always had God's approval to remember. And he also had a group of people who believed in him ... who saw something in him that was not yet ... but could be. I'm wondering what effect their encouragement had on Jesus, especially early in his ministry.

Some time after Jesus' baptism, John the baptizer was standing with two of his disciples when he saw Jesus coming towards them. John said, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." It sounds very much like something John's father, Zechariah the priest, might have intoned over the lambs that people brought for sacrifice in the Temple. I wonder whether Jesus heard what John said, and if he did, how that made him feel. "Here is the Lamb of God

who takes away the sins of the world.” Talk about high expectations! And when Andrew ran to get his brother Simon so he could introduce him to Jesus, he announced, “We have found the Messiah!” Talk about high expectations! How was Jesus going to live up to that? When Nathanael met Jesus, he was so impressed he exclaimed, “‘‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’’” Talk about high expectations! And yet, weren’t they also acting as God’s partners in calling out from Jesus his identity ... his destiny before God?

Our parents name us, but that is only the beginning of our identity. We accrue layers of meaning to our name as we live our lives. Other people add their perspectives, and in this sense, we name each other along the way. We need other people to tell us who we are. I remember an English teacher in the eleventh grade, Mrs. Lasiter, who was always calling on me to diagram sentences and name parts of speech that no one else could or would. I felt like she was picking on me at the time, but her high expectations drew out my love for language. I have been blessed by the encouragement and expectations of others to discover things about myself I might never have known had they not believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself. It was John who recognized in me a call to ministry, and at a time in my life when I hardly knew where I would find the courage and stamina to draw my next breath. Is it possible that John and Andrew and Peter and Phillip and Nathanael had at least a small part to play in helping Jesus to see himself in new ways? Is it possible that God’s best blessings are liberated to full effect in our lives by the way we believe and hope and expect good things from God? And what does that say about our power to bless ... our calling to encourage those around us by believing in them ... and telling them the possibilities we see in them?

Paul writes the Corinthians:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:4-7).

You are all charismatic, he says. You are all gifted by God with the charisma to do God’s work ... to be Christ revealed in the world even as you wait for Christ to be revealed. Here was a group of people who were not winners by the world’s standards. They were not wealthy or powerful or members of the upper class elite. Generally, the members of the early church were poor ... slaves and laborers and members of the lower class. But, Paul tells them, you are special! You are gifted! You are God’s own people. What did that draw out from them?

You have “the gift,” too. You can help someone discover his or her own true name and identity and destiny. When Andrew introduced his brother Simon to Jesus, Jesus said, “Simon ... You will be called Cephas ... translated as Peter ... meaning “Rock.” Talk about high expectations. It’s almost funny. Simon was anything but a Rock at the time ... and through most of the gospel story Simon is all talk and no walk. They might as well have named him “Old Jello.” But Jesus could see something in him that Simon didn’t even know about himself. “Simon, we’ll call you our “Rock.” And he wanted to live up to it. He wanted to be the Rock for the rest of them. And then ... after the resurrection ... after he denied Jesus and Jesus restored him ... after Jesus departed and the Spirit came ... Peter became the Rock, and his confession that Jesus was

Messiah became the Rock upon which the church was founded. Jesus called it out of him. But before that ... Andrew called it out of him ... because Andrew loved his brother enough to go and find him and tell him, "We've found the Messiah! Come and see!" And I wonder who might be waiting to have his best gifts recognized ... her true potential discovered ... by your willingness to say, "We have found the Messiah. Come and see what he might do in your life!" Peter would become the first among the apostles, the Rock upon which the church was built. But he never would have amounted to much at all if it hadn't been for Andrew.

In The Spirituality of Imperfection, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum tell the story of a priest who stopped by to visit one of his parishioners and her five year old daughter, Carmine. Carmine had just received a new jump rope, which the priest showed her how to use. Carmine tried it, and tripped a time or two. But after another few tries she jumped the rope once, then twice, even three times in a row. Her mother and the priest applauded loudly and congratulated her. Carmine wandered off to hone her new skill so that her mother and the priest could visit. But after only a few minutes, she came back into the room dragging her rope. With sad eyes she explained, "Mommy, I can do it. But I need lots of clapping!"

We all need lots of clapping to call out our best ... to show us what we might become. I think these first disciples did that for Jesus even as he would do that for them. Isn't that what it means to be church?

May we pray?

Gracious and Loving God, we pray that you send us encouragers who can see what we might be ... who will applaud our successes ... so that we can rise above our self imposed limits to meet your high expectations for us. We pray that you in turn will send us to the very people who need us to bring out the very best in them. Who knows what might happen if we do...we might just meet the Messiah and reveal him to the world. Amen.