

Sunday, January 18, 2026
Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)
John 1.29-42
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Way Opening”

My previous spiritual director was Quaker. A seemingly odd mix. Me, an Episcopal priest, whose piety and worship style is deeply formed and expressed in hierarchical structure and liturgical practices based on word and music, seeking spiritual guidance and direction from Judith. From one whose piety and worship was rooted in a denomination with far less structure and less reliance on clergy, with worship rooted in periods of extended silence waiting for “That of God in everyone” to inspire someone to speak. And yet, it worked. It was actually just what this Episcopal priest needed at the time by way of spiritual guidance. And just as an aside, George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, was actually raised in the Church of England.

When struggling with particular issues, spiritual or otherwise, when I was experiencing a sense of uncertainty, sometimes profoundly so, Judith would invariably invoke a Quaker spiritual concept: “way will open.” The concept of trusting that a path forward will become clear when the time is right, often after a period of patient waiting, discernment, and letting go of rigid plans. (I don’t know where Judith got the idea that I would ever have any ingrained ideas or rigid plans.) Way opening often requiring that one undertake an action without clarity about all the details, with respect for the ambiguity of the process, trusting that the path would be made clear as one proceeds.

In hindsight I see a very practical application of “way will open” in my own role as priest. Of being like Judith often was for me, called to gently guide others in times of uncertainty, as they waited for way to open, showing them the path that was right for them. One such way was in my first position after ordination, as Episcopal Chaplain at UCLA. I would occasionally have students seek me out, struggling with questions of religious identity. Often raised in a Christian family, but uncertain as to whether that was who they really were. Something I could personally relate to, having had the same questions when I was a college student. As part of my response, I would seek to assure them that, while I am a Christian, and that the Episcopal Church is what speaks most to me, my job was not to make them into Episcopalians or even to make them into Christians. Rather, I viewed my job as helping them find the path that was right for them. If that was Judaism, I would take them next door to Hillel, the Jewish campus ministry, and introduce them to the rabbi. If that was Buddhism, I would take them across campus and introduce them to the monk who ran the Buddhist campus ministry. I viewed my job as being one who journeyed with them until way opened.

Today’s Gospel reading is, for all intents and purposes, about way opening. Specifically, it is about those who are seeking, finding their way to Jesus. It is about John the Baptist, not saying “that’s Jesus, you need to follow him,” but rather providing insight so that way can be made clear. So that those who are seeking, might find their way to Jesus if that is right for them. And it is about Jesus himself, not saying, “you need to be following me,” but rather providing the space so that, for those who feel called to follow him, the way to do so is opened.

The Gospel opens with Jesus making his first appearance in John's Gospel. However, at this point, the focus is on John the Baptist who points the way to Jesus. While not specifically stated, John is apparently talking to some of his disciples, to those who have been following him in his ministry of preaching a baptism of repentance as a way of preparing for the One who is to come. The One coming toward them even now. To his credit, John has been very clear all along as to who he is and who he is not. In fact, in the section of the Gospel before today's passage, John the Baptist is effectively on trial before the priests and Levites who come asking him, "Who are you?" Trying to figure out just why he presumed to engage in his ministry of baptism. Thinking, "he obviously must think he is someone special, like the long-awaited Messiah or the return of one of the great prophets." And yet, John is very clear in his testimony that he is not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet. Rather, he says, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (Jn 1.23). When further pressed about why he was baptizing, he responds, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me" (Jn 1.26-27a). He is clear from the beginning that he is not the way, but rather his job, in word and action, is to point the way.

In that job, he obviously attracted disciples of his own. Those awaiting the coming of the Messiah. Even if they thought John might be the one, John himself was quick to disabuse them of that notion. Effectively telling them, "I am not who you are looking for, but I will help you find him. I will journey with you until way is open."

When John sees Jesus, he takes the opportunity to tell his disciples, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" This one statement sends a profound message. John has been preaching and performing a baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming Messiah. He is saying this one coming toward them is the embodiment of what he has been preaching. And the choice of terminology is significant. "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Knowing the end of the story, about Christ's Passion and Resurrection, we connect the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world as him being the means by which we obtain forgiveness of our sins. Which is most certainly true. Although that was not what John meant, nor where his disciples would have gone with it. John is not talking about individual sins and transgressions. He is talking about the "sin of the world." He is talking about a specific, collective sin. The sin for which he has been preaching repentance. He is talking about the collective alienation from God and from one another. The collective sin which calls for a return to right relationship, with the Lamb of God being the means for that return.

It is easy for us, knowing what we do, to view the Lamb of God as the sacrifice by which forgiveness of sin is achieved. Invoking the ancient image of Temple sacrifices. But that is not what John's disciples would have heard. Largely because lambs were not generally used for sacrifice. Adult sheep, goats, and bulls, yes. These were the animals used for sacrifice. Lambs—baby sheep—were not. Rather, the Lamb of God would have brought to mind a different image from their collective history: the first Passover. When the blood of lambs was put on the lintels of Hebrew homes in Egypt as a sign for the angel of death to pass over the house, to spare the inhabitants, allowing them to flee Egypt and seek a new life in the Promised Land. In first-century Jewish life, the Passover lamb was not a sin offering or sacrifice for atonement, but

rather a ritual reminder of the Exodus story in which the lamb's blood protected the people, making liberation possible. Making freedom possible. Making new life possible. That being the case, John's message to his disciples is clear. Jesus as the Lamb of God is less about being a sacrifice for sin and more about liberation from sin, leading to freedom and new life.

In short, John was sending a coded message to his disciples. One that they needed to figure out for themselves if they were to find the way they sought. That Jesus was ultimately the way they sought. That Jesus was the way to renewed relationship with God, to liberation, and to new life. That Jesus was the way to the liberation that would free them to be who they are truly created and called to be.

The next day, John is again with two of his disciples—the same as the day before or different, we know not. Again, upon seeing Jesus, John repeats, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The disciples get the message. "Thanks, John. We're out of here." No need to feel sorry for John having lost a couple of disciples. In actuality, he has done his job. He has pointed the way. He has helped these two disciples find their way.

Upon noticing that he was being followed, Jesus asks the two former disciples of John, "What are you looking for?" Now if that isn't a loaded question. "We're looking for the Messiah?" "We're looking for salvation?" "We're looking for liberation?" "We're looking for the right path?" Just how do you respond to that? "What are you looking for?" I would venture that, in some ways, they were not even sure themselves what they were looking for. Just that they were looking for something, and they would know it when they found it. All part of way opening. Not always being sure, but trusting that way would open. And, at some deeper level, knowing that Jesus would be the way.

Rather than try to answer such a question—a question that is, in some ways, unanswerable—the would-be disciples wisely respond, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" In calling him rabbi, recognizing Jesus as one whom they can learn from, one who can help them get a little closer to what they are looking for, whatever that may be for them. And in asking where he is staying, indicating that they are interested in exploring, discerning, finding out just what he has to offer.

Perhaps recognizing where they are at, Jesus seeks to give them space. Rather than making some sort of sales pitch to try to convince them to become his disciples, rather than making a case for the benefits of following him, he offers a simple invitation. "Come and see." Recognizing that sometimes, particularly when unclear of what is being sought, answers cannot be given, only experienced.

We do not know what happened between the two would-be disciples and Jesus. What transpired as they accepted the invitation to "come and see." Whatever it was, Jesus' words, his actions, his presence, it was enough. Way had opened and they followed. They had a new path. One that would take them on the journey of their lives. A journey of discovery: of who Jesus is as the Lamb of God, as the Messiah, who Jesus would become as their teacher and their friend. And a journey of self-discovery: of who they truly were as beloveds of God, of who they would be called to become as Jesus' disciples, as those who, in due course, would be called to carry on this ministry in his name.

They did not waste any time in beginning to live into who they were called to be. Jesus had lit a fire within them. Those who had been seeking are now in the process of becoming guides. For when it comes to seeking right relationship with God and one another, when it comes to being liberated to live more fully into who you are created and called to be, the journey never ends. Although the roles can and often do change over time. Jesus' invitation to them to "come and see," became their own, as they went out and proclaimed, "We have found the Messiah," inviting others to "come and see;" an invitation to find their own way through him.

Our Gospel reading for today encapsulates our individual faith journeys. Jesus asks each of us, "What are you looking for?" Like John's former disciples, like Jesus' new disciples, we may not always know just what we are looking for. Sometimes, we just know that we are looking. But we can be assured that Jesus will always be there, ready to issue his invitation, "come and see." In those words, way has opened. It is then up to us to take the next step on the path that leads to liberation and new life.