

January 15, Second Sunday after Epiphany

John 1:29-42

by [Robert C. Saler](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue

“You will see greater things than these.”

“You will see a public ministry that grows at incredible speed until thousands of people are fed on a hillside because they are so desperate for a word of hope from me. But you will see them depart as well, once I do not say all that they want to hear—or say more than they want to hear—about what I came to do.”

“You will see healing that might strike you as downright irresponsible in its profligacy—going into places of pain and loneliness that are hard to look upon, places we have found it so easy not to see, or to theologize our lack of vision away.”

“You will see scandalization of the faith that you thought you knew, all in the name of drawing you deeper into the covenant made between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and God’s people.”

“You will see the tears of a mother that only full humanity, full incarnation, can warrant.”

“You will see triumph take the shape of the cross.”

“You will see death and martyrdom and failure so large that it will look like I have been leading you on a fool’s errand. But you will see faithfulness and perseverance, and God’s surprising healing that will take your breath away and reshape your sense of what is possible in God’s world.”

“You will see the kingdom of God, but it will not be what you expected to see. And you will see the day when you will rejoice that it was so much more than you could have expected.”

What is it we are promising when we invite others to discipleship?

Jesus was not kidding, then or now.

I see a lot of evangelism strategies or inviting people to “come and see” what is happening in church. Less clear, in many of those instances, is the object of the seeing: What exactly is it that we are inviting people to come and see? What would inspire in us the confidence that Jesus himself had in believing that the life to which he was calling his disciples—a life marked by divine spectacles of rent heavens and fulfilled prophecies, but also by persecution, fear, and a need to trust in God’s plan for redemption beyond any reasonable evidence—was one worth undertaking?

See what? What is it that we are promising—explicitly or implicitly—when we invite others on the discipleship journey?

Community? People can find community anywhere, and besides, few honest congregations want the viability of their mission to rise and fall on their success in being welcoming communities.

Justice? Wayne Miller of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod (ELCA) argues, “You can’t follow Jesus for ten steps without bumping into questions of justice, but you can chase justice for 1,000 miles and still not find Jesus.” If the church rises or falls on its ability to foster justice and oppose systemic evil, then the church’s mission likely would not have survived our own transgressions. Our own failures in justice should never lead to complacency, but one hopes they breed humility about what we can promise.

Life purpose and fulfillment? The church should be skeptical about engaging in fulfillment marketing when the terms of that engagement are defined by a pursuit of ease and stability—“peace, peace when there is no peace.” A church that promises purpose that is not cross-shaped is a church that forms people to evade the call to discipleship, not to listen for it. The life of discipleship is a life of purpose, but it is discipleship before it is purpose. Following Jesus might result in “your best life now,” but not without thoroughly messing with your sense of what “best” means.

The step of inviting others to come and see is to pray for eyes to see what is already in the church—the God who comes to us in font and table, in Word and teaching, in the acts of service that we see and in those that are invisible. Fulfillment, formation in justice, and a community of fidelity to God’s action in the world are powerful by-products of engagement with the church, but what God truly invites us *all*—inside and outside the church—to come and see is the way God brings life out of the places

of death in our world.

The confidence that invites others to discipleship in Jesus Christ does not depend on providing a good “experience” of church. Churches fail in discipleship, and no one should be more comfortable than Christians with the idea that all who follow God’s call stand in need of God’s grace. But we can promise that the adventure of discipleship to which we invite others is ultimately not an adventure that we own or control. We are not the tour guides—we are the ones led, the ones who stand in need of new eyes to see and new ears to hear, day in and day out. The call to “come and see” is a call to surprise, and to new possibilities of joy within that surprise.