

When did you first become aware of God in your life? When did you first come to believe? For Christians, there are usually 3 different answers. They span a continuum.

At one end are those who have always had a sense of God's presence in their lives. Such Christians never can remember a time when God wasn't a reality in their lives. Some of you may fall into that category.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who experience a sudden and dramatic conversion. For example, think of our patron saint. We will read about his conversion next week as we celebrate his annual feast day. Saul, the chief persecutor of the church who was struck blind by the glory of Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. After he was healed, he became St. Paul, one of the chief apostles and author of the bulk of the New Testament. Or think of John Newton. He was a slave ship captain and a pretty rotten guy. Yet he had a life changing spiritual encounter with Jesus. He was eventually ordained as a priest in our tradition. Afterwards, he wrote the hymn, "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!" Those are very dramatic types of conversion. Some of you may have experienced that yourselves.

But I suspect many of us, including me, fall somewhere in the middle. A sense of God's presence wasn't always a part of your life. But conversion wasn't a sudden thing either. The process was more gradual. God may have come to you in stages. God may have been laying the groundwork for years, but then some event crystallized your awareness of God and brought it to the forefront.

In the Gospels we hear various stories about the calling of the disciples. We often think of that calling as a rather sudden sort of conversion. That's the way it appears in Matthew, and Mark.¹ In those Gospels, Jesus walks up to the lake shore. He sees two brothers, Simon, and Andrew, who are fishermen. He says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Then he calls two other brothers, James and John. And they all leave their nets and boats behind, and they follow Jesus.

¹ Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20

Now, why the heck would they do this? This stranger walks up, says "Follow me," and they do. They drop everything and follow him. Why would they do this?

Maybe Jesus had such a hypnotic and magnetic personality that they were drawn to him immediately. That is possible. That would make the calling of the first disciples one of those sudden and dramatic types of conversions.

But I think there's more going on than meets the eye in Matthew or Mark. I think John's tradition has something important for us. And for that, we need to turn to today's Gospel lesson. This story takes place right after Jesus' baptism, well before John the Baptist was arrested.

In the beginning of today's Gospel lesson, John the Baptist testifies that Jesus is the Lamb of God.² Then John testifies that he saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus like a dove.³ Then John points Jesus out to 2 of his disciples.⁴ One of them is Andrew. There is a good possibility that the other is John the brother of James. And these two disciples of John the Baptist leave him and follow Jesus.⁵

Now you may be asking, "What are Galilean fisherman doing 70 miles away from home hanging around John the Baptist?"

It turns out, fishing in the Sea of Galilee was a seasonal venture. In the hot summers, the fish go deep into the cool water. If you're fishing with a net in the summer, it's almost impossible to catch anything. However, in the winter, the fish are attracted to the area by the shore where hot springs feed into the lake. Winter is a prime time to scoop them up.

Galilean fisherman in Jesus' day would then salt the fish for export or for storage for other months.

² Jn 1:29

³ Jn 1:32

⁴ Jn 1:35

⁵ Jn 1:37

So maybe these fishermen were on a break during the off-season of summer. Or maybe they were coming back from selling their pickled fish in Jerusalem. But however it might have worked, they've been hanging out with John the Baptist.

And when Jesus passes by, John passes the two disciples off. He tells them to follow Jesus. And they do. As they're tagging along, Jesus turns and asks them "What are you looking for?" They respond, "Teacher/Rabbi, where are you staying?"⁶

Jesus says, "Come and see."⁷ It's a simple invitation. Come and see. Very understated. Yet very powerful. Come and see.

It's a wonderful model for Evangelism. Jesus doesn't beat them over the head with scripture. He doesn't thump a Bible. He doesn't push pamphlets in their faces. He meets them where they are. "What are you looking for? Come and see."

And it works. Andrew is so impressed by Jesus that he brings his brother Simon Peter to meet him.⁸ Later in the chapter, Philip and Nathaniel join up. In fact, Philip uses the same words Jesus used, "Come and see."⁹ And if you continue reading John, they hang around with Jesus for at least a week.

Now, it doesn't take too much imagination to put the scenario of the Gospel of John and the scenario of Matthew and Mark together. John suggests that these disciples had a relationship with Jesus early on. Later on, by the time Jesus calls the 4 fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, there's a good chance that they've had a while to mull over his earlier teachings.

And apparently at that point, they're ready to commit. And they commit whole hog. They leave their nets. They leave their boats. They leave their livelihoods behind. And they begin to follow Jesus in earnest.

⁶ Jn 1:38

⁷ Jn 1:39

⁸ Jn 1:42

⁹ Jn 1:46

I suspect that the calling of the 4 fishermen is not an example of sudden and dramatic conversion. Instead, I think it's an example of God working on them little by little, until the right moment comes along. And at that point, everything crystallizes for them. And they are ready to follow Jesus Christ as his disciples.

They first hear Jesus say "Come and see." And then afterwards they are ready to respond when he says, "Follow me."

And this is good news for us in two different ways.

First, because so often we equate discipleship with the kind of radical response of those 4 disciples: dropping everything and heading off down the road. So we beat ourselves up spiritually. We think things like, "If I were really going to be a good Christian then I would need to quit my job and head off and be a missionary in Outer Mongolia."

Of course, if Jesus is really calling you to do something like that, then you need to pay attention. But that's not the normal pattern. I don't believe it was even the normal pattern for the disciples.

I believe that they started following Jesus early on, that they went back to their regular jobs as fishermen until a very specific and narrow call came to them a while later. And even then, Jesus didn't change their job title. They were still going to be fishermen. He just changed the type of fishing they were going to do, fishing for people. So that's good news for all of us ordinary Christians who are called to follow Jesus in the midst of our regular occupations. We don't have to beat ourselves up because we're not dropping everything.

In fact, God needs Christian doctors and nurses, Christian teachers and bankers, Christian police officers and attorneys. Maybe God especially needs Christian attorneys. God needs faithful servants in all walks of life. So that's good news.

It's also good news in another way. Part of our job as Christians is to go into all the world and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. And this can seem a daunting and overwhelming task.

But remember. You don't call people to be disciples. Jesus calls them to be disciples. Jesus is the one who says, "Follow me." But you can help. You don't have the authority to say, "Follow me." But you can say, "Come and see."

We do this all the time in our secular lives. We say the equivalent of 'Come and see' over and over again. "Hey, have you seen this movie? Well, you really need to see it." "Hey, have you eaten at this restaurant? You ought to try it, the food is great." "Hey, I've got an extra ticket to the game. Do you want to come with me?"

And yet, when it comes to our faith, we often clam up. We tend to keep our religion private. We're very hesitant to share our faith with those around us. And yet, the reality is, most people don't come to a new church because of the signs. It's not social media or the website.

Most people still visit a church because they're invited by their friends. The #1 most effective way of bringing people to begin the path of discipleship is to invite them. That's something you can do. Make that invitation, "Come and see."

Do you want to come with me to church? We've got lots of exciting things going on. The people are great. The priest is a little weird, but it's a great place anyway. St. Paul's has meant a lot to me. Will you come join us this Sunday?

Those are ways of saying, "Come and see." That's the way to get people started on the Christian path. Not a hard sell. But a simple invitation.

That's the most effective way of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. You make the invitation, "Come and see." Then let Jesus make the invitation, "Follow me."