

Sermon on Epiphany 2
(Is 49:1-7; Ps 40:1-12; 1 Cor 1:1-9; Jn 1:29-42)

He wasn't my kind of financial investor, dressed too flashy, always positive, too much bling around the place, that "artificial feel" that comes from trying too hard.

Why was I here, I wondered? Because of a personal reference. The reference had said, if you want an advisor who will take you seriously even if you don't have a lot of money, he's your guy.

And because I trusted my reference completely, I went with it and he was right; first impressions can fool you, but a person's actions don't lie! I was treated seriously, not made to look stupid, educated and helped!

A personal reference is probably the most powerful form of recommendation, especially if given by someone who is knowledgeable and trustworthy!

For a lot of things we probably don't need a reference; regular advertising will show us the way. You probably don't need a reference when choosing a restaurant; that's usually a low-risk venture (although if you're looking for the perfect restaurant at which you will propose marriage, you might beg to differ)

but other times, say, when faced with a change of vocation, when seeking to make an important investment, you long for someone whom you trust to say, "that's a great idea or have you thought of this?"

So here's the really important question; what was it that caused that trustworthy person to take the risk, because it is a risk on their part, and give you the recommendation in the first?

If they recommend a particular car repair shop it's probably because they found that they were served well there; not overcharged, possibly saved further costs by an alert mechanic who noticed something amiss.

It was their *personal experience* of being in a certain environment and being helped by people with skills, expertise and character that caused them to want to tell their friends and family about it, or if asked for a recommendation, to offer their experience as a reference.

All this is so obvious you may wonder why I'm saying it; well; it's early in the morning, so there's that but actually this obvious thing is all we mean by evangelism; to share good news is the most natural thing. As social beings we love to share with others what has meant something to us.

When in the words of psalm 40 we've been extracted from desolation, from what seemed like a stuck position (miry pit is such a great metaphor for that); when, in other words a major problem in our lives has been solved, or the circumstances in our lives that have hemmed us in (health,

relationship, poverty) have given way to new possibilities, then, again to use our psalm, we feel like we can sing again, and we don't mind who hears us!

I'm aware this morning that in any gathering there are people who feel like they've just entered the miry pit, those that are still in it and longing for release and people who have just come through it; those of us who have "gone through it" and the testimony we offer is so crucial for the rest of us who are longing for a breakthrough.

This is how the light spreads, this is how hope stays alive in us and for the sake of the world.

In our passage from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, we are at the beginning of the famous "servant songs," written when Israel is in the pit of exile, in which the question is asked in vs. 3 "Who is the Servant?"

The answer to that question is essentially the answer to the question, "who will get us out of this mess? Who is our Helper and how does that Help come?"

Isaiah's answer is a threefold concentric circle: first, the nation as a whole, despised as it is by the nations, v. 7; second, a remnant within the nation who try to draw the nation back to its true calling as a light to the world, v. 6

and then, just outside the scope of our reading this morning in the next chapter, and certainly more mysteriously, a singular figure, one who stands as a witness to both remnant and nation.

Jews have traditionally said "we're waiting for this One," though many reformed and liberal Jews have recast the question and the answer and are no longer waiting.

Christians have traditionally said, of course, Jesus is the One, but that's not the end of the pattern's dynamism as continues to work its way out in the world and in our lives.

Extraordinarily, the New Testament identifies "ordinary Christians" (there really is no such person) as somehow existing in all three circles at the same time!

If Isaiah has a three-two-one pattern then the deep mystery and radicalness of the New Testament is the reverse, starting with the one we move to the "two" and then three!

There is Christ, then you and I, in and through baptism, are "in Christ," and as those "in Christ," we are part of the mystical body, the worldwide Body of Christ.

This is what relativizes all hemming-in-barriers, all the "miry pits" that humanity has experienced for most of its existence: social barriers of class and economic power.

We have no idea how radical it was for slaves and owners to fellowship, eat and worship together in Rome; more radical than what we think of as anarchy!

It's ironic that in our culture, Christianity is thought of as a conservative ideology, aligned with particular political parties.

This is not to make a comment about political parties and what they stand for but simply to put out the radicalness of our participation in Christ

Back to the good news, 3-2-1 has become, in Christ, 1-2-3! We are, as Paul says, in fellowship with God's son, saints together with those in every place who call on the name of Christ.

These aren't sentiments, but at the heart of our faith.

We don't "attend services," we don't "go to church," you all know how to complete the sentence, "we are the church!" Sometimes it's instructive to ruminate on words that have become stale through use but that hold the key to everything.

Israel's and Jesus' Servant song is our new song, we too are the servant(s); we too are those called to give and be a reference for God's good news.

The chain of Epiphany light is shown in our Gospel text: John testifies; his disciples go to Jesus; Jesus says "come and see," Andrew does "go and see," tells his brother "we've found the Messiah," Andrew brings him to Jesus and Jesus says, "you're Simon, son of John but I'm calling you "rock."

Not only lifted from mire, onto more solid rock, but *made* rock! Everyone who comes to Christ is moved from desolation or stuckness, from a sense of aimlessness or uselessness into a new identity.

It's as if once we glimpse the unique servant, we catch a glimpse of our own reflection in Him; then we become part of the light-sharers, not because we have to but because we want to!

And supported by others we become more than we could ever be on our own.

Where these texts lead us, I believe, is to view ourselves quite differently; we don't first of all look at our size as numbers go, we don't look at our successes or our failures first, rather we understand ourselves as united with Christ, we are in Him.

From there we begin to act as if we're a parish that values all that is good from the past as well as the present ("in Christ" we are connected to all times, to deep time, to events in the past and events yet to be); a congregation that is called to be a thoughtful interlocutor with cultural issues, both pressing and more aesthetic

A congregation that believes that we don't have to draw a large crowd to be yeast in the larger social dough

A congregation that is missional, starting with the gifts that we have together, expanding our "servanthood" towards one another and thus making place for others to do the same!

I hope you believe, along with me, that, gathered in prayerful communion we can indeed find that fulfillment we see so dynamically expressed in our gospel story, “Hey, I’m part of something, I’ve discovered someone, you should really check out...”