

John F. Carter

January 19, 2020

St. Andrews in Kent

Epiphany II

**“There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.”  
Leonard Cohen**

I went out for a walk yesterday under cold gray skies. Just after setting out, I ran into a neighbor with whom I had not spoken for a long time. We had a run-in some years back, and since then I have been fearful and have avoided him. On the other hand, I was uneasy with my lack of courage and knew something was wrong. What happened to “*Love thy neighbor?*”

Recently, he and his wife erected a marvelous Calderesque Sculpture in their front yard. When the wind blows, it moves magically. I began to see my neighbor in a new way.

I saw his car coming and made a perfunctory wave. He stopped and rolled down the window. We then proceeded to have a very warm exchange with smiles and sharing about our lives. I mentioned how much I enjoyed the new sculpture. My defensive scales fell away. We talked about family. I asked about his daughter. She finally found the job she had felt called to. Over the course of one year, she had more than 19 interviews. My neighbor had suffered during the time she was looking and waiting and sweating it out. I said something like, when they suffer we suffer. As he drove off, I was very happy and relieved to reconnect with him. Sometimes I have actually believed my projections☺

The sense of being called or drawn towards some new place is a starting point, not an ending. The calling gets us into the boat. Then we

have to paddle. But we leave the shore. And we start a new adventure.

In the early 80s when I was at seminary the standard nomenclature to describe why we were there was to say we felt “called”. I never felt quite comfortable with that term. Like any institution, the church has its customary lingo. I never had a major conversion experience. More of a slow burn.

My friends often seemed to have more faith than I did... I don't believe that is true now.

After several interviews at Saint Johns in Salisbury, the Search Committee and the Vestry called me in the fall of 1998 to be Rector. I did not have another job prospect at that moment and was otherwise only partially employed, so you might think it was a no-brainer. But it wasn't. I wanted confirmation or clarification.

When my wife and I visited St. John's several months prior to that call, it was an incredibly beautiful July day in an incredibly beautiful part of the country. I fell in love with the area.

Several months later, on retreat at the then “Trinity Conference Center”, I was trying to figure out how to respond to St. John's.

One day, I took a walk down the dirt road that goes parallel to the Housatonic River. The sunshine was bright and warm on that early autumn day. The movement and sounds of the river, the light and the reflections were all beautiful.

Enticed by all that splendor, I ventured into the river for a dip. As you can imagine, the water was cold, the same water that flows right by the town of Kent. Wanting the warmth of the sun, I brushed off the water and lay down on a boulder looking up at the sky. While gazing up, I saw two eagles soaring overhead.

That was it! I decided to take the job and would figure out the calling over time.

In today's lesson from Isaiah, we encounter a prophet who has outstanding credentials for the calling he has received from God.

Everything seems to be going perfectly for this prophet. He's a success. He has served God by leading the people of Israel back to God.

Then these lines, "*But I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;*"

Having been very successful in his career, he finds himself burned out and bummed out. What has happened? Whence this despondency? I imagine that we too have been there when we thought we were on the right track, attained the right goals and achieved some level of credibility and acceptance in our work or community. Then something cracks. Why do we find it hard to feel adequate?

Isaiah cracked too. But out of his sense of failure came a promotion a new opportunity. "Failure" may hold a lot of promise. After shepherding God's people back to faith, God assigns a much grander mission to the prophet. As if to say, "*We're not done yet, Isiaah.*"

*"It is to light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore their survivors of Israel; now... I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation my range to the end of the earth."*

The mission here appears to be universal salvation. This was an expansive, generous and extraordinary idea. Conquest was usually seen in military and nationalistic terms. But here, God directs the prophet beyond nationalism, opening up new ways for the light of God to extend beyond the borders of nation, temple, church and the halls of power.

Universal salvation transcends all religious institutions and appeals to a deep soul hunger for establishing connections of peace with our

neighbors both right next door and far away.

Our world is sundered by nationalistic, religious and ethnic divisions. The rise of white supremacy and hate crimes in our country may lead us to awaken and to long for something far better. It already has. The light still shines, perhaps even brighter in dark skies.

When I retired from St. John's six years ago, I began a period of not knowing what was next, a period of loss and grief. I cracked. Perhaps this is similar to what you have recently experienced here with Roger's retirement. I believed that I had served God and the parish of Saint Johns, but now I looked into the unknown. It was a period of freefall.

Three years ago, my heart woke up and led me to a new place in ministry, one towards which I suspect I had been drawn for a long time. A dark night of fear and oppression was falling upon our Hispanic brothers and sisters. I had to respond and wanted to help. And I did. Since that time, my heart has grown through my experiences with the undocumented and their families. At times, it has been painful. Still, it is a privilege for me to be trusted and known. I am grateful for new friends and a larger sense of family.

*Estoy agradecido tener ahora nuevos amigos en la causa y también una familia más grande y maravillosa.*

Ironically, it is the darkness of these times that propelled me into this new and unanticipated stage in my life. Should I then be grateful for the darkness? Probably not. But I am grateful for the opportunity to be useful to others.

I suppose I might name this "a calling".

