

January 19, 2020 Second Sunday after Epiphany
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GOSPEL John 1:29-42

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the first chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

29[John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ 31I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” 32And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

35The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” 37The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” 39He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. 40One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. 41He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). 42He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

You remember those motivational posters
that started going up on the walls
of so many of open-floor plan offices
in the 90's and early aughts?
There was one with an eagle soaring
over the silhouette of mountain peaks at sunset?
And giant waves in the foreground
of an expansive horizon on the open ocean?
There would be one word...like "Leadership" or "Perseverance" ...
with a tagline printed under it?"

Well, one year my dad discovered a company
whose website was (and is, I will say,
they've done well for themselves) despair.com.

There you can still today find a treasure trove
of cynical and ironic versions of those same types of posters.
Maybe you've seen them.

My favorites include the circle of hands
like the center of a football huddle, over the word "Meetings"
and the tagline: "none of us is as dumb as all of us."

Or... "Stress," where a solitary figure stands on a barren rocky peak,
with a layer of cloud cover spreading out below
and all around them...

It says "Just look for me somewhere beyond the limits
of human endurance."

The one for "Tradition" has a blurred action shot
from the running of the bulls and says,
"Just because you've always done it that way
doesn't mean it's not incredibly stupid."

And, election season is ramping up...
so when I looked back at the website this week,
the view of the U.S. Capitol at dawn
over the word "Government" caught my eye...

so I read on:

“You think the problems we create are bad,
just wait until you see our solutions.”

Now both the idealistic and sarcastic versions of these posters
(and, in fact, most things we see and post on the internet)
appeal to us because somewhere within them
is a kernel of truth that we’re already inclined to believe
and that’s most palatable
when it’s boiled down into something simple...
easily digestible...
like an image and a tagline.

Of course, our real lives are much more messy...
living out our hopes and our values and relationships...
is not often a pretty picture or a catchy turn of phrase.

It’s why I’m so fond of what we hear from the gospel of John today...
because people have begun to encounter Jesus...
who is beginning his public ministry.
And they all want an explanation of who he is
and what he is about to do.

John recognizes him when he appears...
but as soon as he starts trying to put into words who Jesus is
he starts making even less sense than he already did.

“This is he of whom I said,
‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me
because he was before me.’”

He says again and again “I did not know him,”
but he seems to know him now...

He rambles out the story of Jesus’ baptism
in a way that would make no sense to anyone
who wasn’t there when it happened.

But some of the disciples who had been following John

wanted to know more...

because they start kind of tailing Jesus, it seems.

And Jesus just turns around and asks, point blank,

“What are you looking for?”

They seem wrong-footed by the question.

They don't have a very good answer...

so they just ask where he's staying.

And Jesus clearly does not know the rules of what you share

with weird people who are following you on the street

who you've only just met,

and invites them to “come and see.”

But of course,

it's really the disciples who don't know what they're getting into.

Jesus doesn't offer them an itinerary, a clear job description,

or an inspiring quote.

He just tells them that if they really want to know what he's about,

they're just going to have to come along.

It's fitting that this year we hear these words

the weekend that many of us will pause

for at least a few moments... maybe not enough moments...

to honor the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

He is someone who, in some of our own lifetimes,

answered the complicated call to come and see

what God was doing...

and to be a part of it.

And, though many beautiful quotes will be posted

alongside images of him...or his memorial...or beautiful sunsets...

We probably only really honor him

if we “come and see” a little farther

than confirming what we are already inclined to believe...

a little farther what we think we know...

farther than the inspiring quote and beautiful picture.

It's not easy, though.

I think one of the reasons that journey is so hard to take
is the same reason it probably was for those disciples
by the Jordan River all those years ago.

Because we may not have an answer to Jesus' question:

“What are you looking for?”

We may think we're playing spy behind Jesus...
tip-toeing along...kind of noncommittal...
just trying to figure out what he's up to.

But he knows we're there.

And he knows there's a hunger in our hearts
that's pulling us along behind him.

Maybe we're not even aware of what we are really looking for.

There's so much to distract us...

so many reasons we may not feel like we're allowed to look for
or name what we hunger for more than anything in the world.

We may have been convinced we don't deserve it.

Even worse...if we do name our deepest desires...

we might have to truly confront the possibility
that our hungers and yearning will go unfulfilled.

If we say it out loud, we feel the absence of it even worse...

or so we think.

And that is a real risk of stepping out boldly
into the path of discipleship.

We might get hurt. We might lose something that matters to us.

We might not find the thing that matters that still eludes us.

It might not go the way we hope.

And it sure won't fit on a motivational poster caption.

But here's the good news.

Before we know what we are looking for...
or when we can't admit it to ourselves
or find the strength to say it out loud...
because of our shame...or our fear...

Before we can answer Jesus' question,
Jesus has offered his own answer to us...
Jesus has taken on all the risk of rejection
and all the vulnerability of honesty...

Because his presence is his answer.
It is why we are here now...right in front of him...
He's inviting us to join him...to come and see...together.
He is here to come and see...
and love and claim and journey...with us.
Because we are what he is looking for...

And that is why we don't have to be afraid
of our own answer to the question.
It is the only way we can accept the invitation to come and see.

We can answer. We can come and see.

Because Jesus did it first.

And what comes next won't be simply or easy...
It will refuse to be domesticated
or boiled down to a caption
under a photo of an eagle soaring over a mountain at sunset.
What it will be is difficult, messy, life-changing...

and everything we could ever be looking for.

The Lamb of God is here with us.

The kingdom of God has come close.
The arc of the moral universe keeps bending towards justice.

There is so much work to do...so much love to share.

Come and see.

Amen.