

2ND Sunday after the Epiphany
January 14, 2018
John 1:43-51
The Rev. Carenda Baker

COME AND SEE. “*Come and see*” leads to a moment of pleasure and joy when my mother, gazing out the window into the back yard says to my father, “Ted, come look at these two cardinals at the birdfeeder. And there just went a black squirrel into the fence row.” “*Come and See*” was an altogether different experience when I was considering which seminary to attend for my Anglican studies year. The School of Theology of the University of the South in Sewanee, TN hosts an annual event called “*Come and See*”. This is more than a brilliant marketing strategy, though it is that. It’s an invitation for prospective seminarians – to “come and see” what this learning community and its life atop “the Mountain” on the Cumberland Plateau is really like. This “*come and see*” event promised to be an experience of revealing, with all the potential for life-giving transformation.

John’s gospel could be called the “come and see” gospel. In it, the gospel writer tells story after story of people meeting Jesus, many for the first time. Nicodemus. The Samaritan woman at the well. The man born blind. The woman caught in adultery. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Mary Magdalene at the garden tomb on Easter morning. In every story, never do you get the impression that it was a once and done encounter, meeting Jesus.

In the passage just before today’s gospel reading, two of John’s disciples, Andrew and another unnamed disciple were following Jesus, when he turns around and says, “*What are you looking for?*” “*Rabbi, where are you staying?*” they ask. Jesus says, “*Come and see*”. They stay with him the rest of the day. Andrew goes to find his brother Peter and tells him, “*We have found the Messiah.*” This cascade of connections begins when Jesus simply invites John’s two curious disciples to “*come and see*” where he is staying.

Jesus moves on to Galilee from there, meets Philip and says to him, “*Follow me*”. This is great news to be shared, so Philip runs to his good buddy Nathaniel and says, “*We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.*”

If we had been there that day, some of us very well may have responded like Nathaniel did. Imagine it in our local context. “Fort Loudon? You’re kidding, right, Philip? Has anything good ever come from there?”, except that it was the town of Nazareth, Jesus’ hometown, which Nathaniel was dismissing.

Bless dear Philip's heart. He doesn't coerce, lecture or scold. Doesn't get impatient and perturbed in response to Nathaniel's skepticism, doubt, and snarky sarcasm. Just that simple invitation again – *"Come and see"*.

And Jesus' response when Nathaniel approaches? *"Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."* Jesus pays Nathaniel a compliment, as if he actually can see into Nathaniel's heart. Jesus could have thought and even said, "Well here is a cynic who is stunted by doubt." Or "Here is a man whose heart is ruled by prejudice". Or, "Here is a man who is blunt and callous in his words". Or, "Here is a man who is passive and does not want to commit to anything."

But that was not Jesus' way of seeing. Jesus saw with the eyes of grace, the eyes of God's unconditional love. Jesus saw potential, promise, possibility in Nathaniel. He glimpses the person Nathaniel can become, the man God wants him to be.

In all the encounters with Jesus in this gospel, John drives home the same point again and again. Believing in Jesus is the launching point, but not the final destination. Believing is for the purpose of "having life in his name". Knowing information about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit doesn't cut it for John. Always there is an invitation to more. Always potential movement from "come and see" Jesus, to "come and be" with Jesus. Being with Jesus – that is the source of life abundant. "Being with Jesus", abiding, spending time with the risen Lord like we would with a dear friend, over time becoming more vulnerable, more intimate, more trusting. This is how we learn to see the way Jesus sees.

And how our world desperately needs that kind of seeing! Have you ever experienced a moment when you were able look beyond the surface and glimpsed the possibility in a person or situation? You see the anger in a woman, and you begin to look beneath her anger to see a woman with a passion for justice. You notice the man who is shy, but you also recognize his hunger for connection. In that co-worker, underneath their streak of bossiness, you see someone with the capacity for leadership. Beneath the quietness of one who is an introvert, you see more – a gift for meditative reflection. In the young man or woman who is reckless and impulsive, you see the seeds of courage.

Always with Jesus there is the gracious invitation to move from "come and see" in an initial encounter, to "come and be" – spending time with Jesus, getting to know him so that we become the people we were made to be. The people God sees and the world needs. Even though we fail and fall short. Even when we have a hard time believing.

Even when we don't feel worthy of God's attention and care. Even when we have a hard time getting ourselves to church.

Jesus is always there – inviting, loving, forgiving, redeeming. Seeing in us what we cannot even see in ourselves. *“From his fullness we have all received”*, writes John in the first chapter of his gospel, *“grace upon grace”*. There is no earning a place with God. No point or ledger system, no stockpiling of good deeds to prove that we are on God's side, because God doesn't have sides.

As I reflected on this gospel lesson I wondered, “Why does it matter if we accept the invitation to “come and see”? What difference does it make if we learn how to extend God's gracious invitation to others? What difference does it make whether or not, that by being with Jesus, we learn to see with Jesus' eyes?

Well, again from John's gospel, *“For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* The world - saved. Not just the wealthiest 1%. Not just those who speak English, or have white skin. Not just those who are gainfully employed. And being saved is not to receive some future reward after we die, but saved from the moment we encounter Jesus, to make a difference in the world. To mirror God's light, and grace, and truth. To join God in saving the world.

Why does it matter if we learn to see with Jesus' eyes? Because our world needs to see and understand what the Christian faith is really about. It's about walking in the way, following a risen living Lord. It is not about a firmly held belief system, particular ideology, or propping up an institution – religious or civil. Christianity is about a living relationship and about seeing the potential for transformed lives fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

If ever our nation needed such an awakening, an “epiphany”, a revealing of light and grace and truth to transform people's minds and hearts, it is now. We desperately need to hear and tell about those “God sightings” in our own lives and in life unfolding daily around us daily.

Listen to Martin Luther King, Jr. tell of one instance of personal epiphany, often described as his “vision in the kitchen” which changed him, as he describes it in his book about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom*:

"I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers.

I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone. At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

(Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, 1st ed., Harper, 1958, 124-125.)

Come and see. Come and see and learn to be with Jesus. Learn to live like Jesus. To become what you were born to be: Reflections of the light of Christ in a world stumbling and fumbling in the dark. Reflections of the One who lights up the world with grace, truth, justice, and love.

In November when we were on pilgrimage in Israel, I could almost hear Jesus' voice there in Galilee. I could definitely imagine his voice, inviting us. "Come and see. Come be with me. Learn from me. Walk with me. Follow me. Learn to share the Father's love and light."

"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:3-5).

"From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." (John 1:16), writes the gospeler John.

Come, friends. Come and see. Come and be with Jesus. Following him, let us become the people we were born to be. Beloved sons and daughters, who when God gazes at us, sees us fully - born to make the world brighter with Christ's love, and in Christ's name.

Amen.