

Sermon – “Come and See”
Sunday, January 15, 2017
Scripture Readings: Psalm 40:1-11, John 1:29-42
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Our first reading reminds us of the faithfulness of God, even when we find ourselves waiting, needing patience, wondering why God’s mercy has not yet been revealed to us. It recounts our joyful response when God’s trustworthiness is again demonstrated to us.

I waited patiently for the LORD;

[the LORD] inclined to me and heard my cry.

*[The LORD] drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.*

*[The LORD] put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.*

Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.

*Happy are those who make the LORD their trust,
who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.*

*You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;
none can compare with you.*

Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted.

*Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.*

*Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”*

*I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation;
see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD.*

I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,

I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;

I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.

Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me;

let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.

Our second reading comes early in the Gospel According to John, chapter 1, verses 29 through 42. It tells of the encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist at the river Jordan, and what follows after it. Hear God’s word to you.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I 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.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When 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?" He 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. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He 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).

One of the great mysteries of the Christian life is that so much of the Christian life is mystery. Why are we left in the dark so? Have you ever wondered why things aren't just made more clear? I wonder that all the time. Why does truth and full comprehension of what the faithful life entails have to be so hidden? Why does so much about God have to be so obscured and understood only dimly, or faintly, or not at all?

Have you ever tried to live a thoroughly Christian life? I don't mean the surface level depiction of the faith—"Just be nice, and pray sometimes"—I mean seriously examining all of the practices of your life and earnestly trying to overhaul the whole thing, everything you do, say, pursue, think, and value to fit the often odd and always challenging things that Jesus said, and taking up the whole Bible with the goal of understanding it comprehensively?

You should.

You'll fail, though. All the time, and miserably, and in more than one way. We'll talk some time about the long struggle of continual failure in living the Christian life rightly, but right now I want us to consider the parallel long struggle of being without understanding and comprehension.

Noticing this perplexing obstacle doesn't require having taken up vows and monastery life. If you've ever even *slightly* tried the task of submitting your life to Christ or the endeavor of reading a fair amount of scripture, then you probably know well what I'm talking about with regard to being left in the dark, struggling to understand. There is so much that seems important, some of which we can, at best, be *pretty* sure of, most of which feels like a best guess, and so little of which we can claim to have masterful knowledge. We long for deep understanding to flow to us in an immediate, complete dose, and we're given instead a slow, measured diet of it as we go along.

It apparently was always so. We hear of two disciples of John the Baptist today, standing with him when he sees a passing Jesus and utters a surprising exclamation: "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" Spurred by this unexpected acclamation, the two abruptly take off and start trailing Jesus, and when he turns and wonders what they want, they ask him the simplest of questions.

"Where are you staying?" they inquire. Not something hard to answer, like "Who are you that John would say such an amazing thing about you?" or "What did he mean by describing you with such a strange phrase as the 'Lamb of God?'" No, "Where are you staying?" is all. Maybe they just wanted to know where they could go find him later to hear some of the teaching of someone their own teacher, John, clearly regarded as important.

Yet to even such a simple query as that Jesus doesn't give them an answer. "Come and see," he answers. The only way for them to find out where he is headed is to follow him there.

John himself has a much more intimidating mystery in the call he has been given to follow. Did you catch the surprising admission in John's announcement about Jesus? Let's go back and hear part of the word again.

[John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' *I myself did not know him*; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. *I 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.'"¹

John was given a crazy-sounding mission out in the wilderness, living off the land, eating locusts and wild honey, calling people to repentance and being a general spectacle, prophesying, and baptizing people in the Jordan River; living this life all to one end: He was sent out to venture forth on this outlandish life path in order "that [the Lamb of God] might be revealed" ...*without having any idea who that was*. Twice in three sentences John says, "I myself did not know him."

This is a pretty interesting admission. Even for John the Baptist, that great prophet and preacher who is bringing out all of Jerusalem to hear him, the man preparing the way for the incarnate Lord of all creation, a fundamental piece of what he is there for is left a mystery to him. He, too, is asked to "come and see."

There is something about the call to Christ that seems consistently to involve entrusting ourselves to him on a journey. We look to collect all the info ahead of time, but we are not given it. We want to know what we are getting into. We want to engage on our own terms, and we want to know, I suppose, enough to make our own, informed choices.

Augustine of Hippo, the late 4th and early 5th Century bishop and theologian, knew of this struggle, and he wrote these words when contemplating a later chapter of the Gospel of John: "[U]nderstanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that you may understand."²

Now sometimes those words of Augustine are looked at rather skeptically in the modern era, because they can be heard as suggesting that our attempts to understand the teachings of the church before adopting them as beliefs are not welcome; that instead we should have blind faith in whatever doctrine we are handed.

But Augustine wasn't talking about believing in *doctrine* before we understood where it would lead us. He was talking about believing in *Jesus* before we understood where *he* would lead us. Augustine was talking not about intellectual faith, but personal faith—trust, in other words. Do we trust the person of Jesus? That is really the choice. Creedal confession does not come first, but recognition of Jesus as one worth following somewhere. "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" those disciples heard announced from someone else they already trusted. Others saw him heal, or received mercy at his hands, or heard a piece of his teachings.

¹ John 1:29-33 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Augustine of Hippo, *Tractate 29* (on John 7:14-18), paragraph 6.

Whatever their encounter with Jesus, they found something about him compelling, as have we, perhaps, somewhere along the way; and they followed. They found that discipleship, like apprenticeship, is experiential, active. It is about entrusting yourself to a master teacher, not to be fed purely academic discourse to be assembled into a theoretical framework of understanding, but to be led, shown, taught by the fusion of words, demonstration, individual care, and hands-on trial and error, all according to the path set for you personally by the one leading you along.

We may try to find out where this all will take us before committing to anything. But over and over again, the call of Jesus seems to be one to follow and only thereby find out where we are going. "Come and see." Why would this be? Why cannot things just be laid out for us in clear terms from the start?

Would you forgive me if I got you this far, this deep into the question, and then admitted I don't know the answer?

I do at least have a few thoughts on the subject, though.

The pattern is too consistent to be a fluke, of disciples having to venture forth, not given great stores of knowledge in which they can put their faith for navigating the path ahead, but rather having faith in the person of Jesus Christ who will lead them down the path ahead. Our knowledge, like theirs, is lacking. Why don't we get to know ahead of time all of what we will find down the road of faith?

Is it sometimes because we aren't prepared to handle now what we will become prepared for in the course of the journey? I suspect in many cases we would be scared off if we, as weak, unpracticed, baby Christians, were made fully aware of what we would be expected to do or face as mature Christians. Would we get on the path every time if we always knew what we'd encounter later or what we'd give up along the way?

An analogy: what future parent, having a *full* intellectual grasp of what is involved, of what parenthood costs a person and causes one to give up or change, would go ahead with bringing children into the world? No, we take it on blissfully having no real idea of what it will take until we experience it, and then it is only in the experience itself that we can come to understand not only the full cost but the fact that it is well worth it. There is much in the world whose value cannot be understood until it is actually experienced. People sometimes speak of endeavors and creative projects of all sorts in language that shows this to be so: "I would never have done this if I had any idea what it would take, and I'm so glad I had no idea what it would take," I have heard more than one person say.

Does the Christian life work this way as well? I suspect that, at least sometimes, it does. We are, after all, not being invited on a quick little trip. If you could feel, all at once, the enormous consequence resting on your call as an eternal disciple of Jesus Christ, could you possibly hope to bear it?

Even the in-the-world consequences of our life as Christians can be intimidating. Tomorrow our nation remembers Martin Luther King, Jr., honoring his part in the struggle to move the world toward greater justice. King took this up in his capacity as a follower of Christ. And he, like us, like John, and like John's disciples, did not know what was in store for him. We know he learned to lead and to make change happen, and that he struggled as his awareness of the possibility of his own death grew. His gift of love was in the end complete in this way, and its value to the world immense, but at the beginning he would not have known all of what it would be.

Perhaps he would have done it all anyway. But sometimes, maybe most of the time, we do not yet possess all of the strengths and qualifications for the role we are given when first given it; but rather grow, by the help of God, into the role we are given as we live into it. We can be thankful for this.

There is another imaginable reason I can think of why the way of Christ is often to give us no direct explanation, but instead to say, "Come and see." Perhaps it is simply that believing in Christ *himself* is more important than believing any *thing* that we could learn. This would not surprise me. Particularly in the Gospel of John, it requires doing violence to the text to make any attempt at extracting some kind of "message of Jesus" separate from himself. In all the Gospels, but most undeniably in John, Jesus *is* the message that is preached. Not the acquisition of knowledge or understanding, but faith in Christ himself is made the starting point and foundation. We are then invited, under his care, to "come and see" the rest. Look, here is the Lamb of God! Let us go and follow, and may God reveal to us in due time all mysteries. Amen.