

WORSHIP

Sermon | 1.14.2018



Come and See

By the Reverend Pen Peery

John 1:35-46

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).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

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We live in interesting times, don't we?

I was a political science major in college.

I thought I was going to law school like my grandfather.

It turns out, I was just drawn to political science because I am interested in why people follow certain candidates and why they affiliate with certain political parties.



As messy as politics may seem, there is a science to it. Strategy, too.

How to appeal to a person's values, or instincts, or worries.

How to build a narrative that invites others to find their part in the story.

How to build public trust and confidence in a candidate's ability to lead.

Regardless of what you think about the work of those we have elected to office, it's hard to argue that the last two years have been boring.

And if you are one who finds the science around elections as interesting as I do, these past two years have been downright fascinating.

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This morning, in John's gospel, we find a passage that describes how Jesus started a movement. Sometimes – surrounded by established bricks and mortar and more than 2,000 years of history – it is easy for us to forget that. But before there was all of this...there was a man, a teacher, who lived in a backwater town (population 300) called Nazareth, who, after a while, started to attract people...someone who generated a following.

That's the story this first chapter of John tells us: how that following started...who joined it... and what was effective in building that coalition of disciples.

Sure – since then...for good and for ill...we have turned this movement that Jesus started into what we now think of as "Church."

In our time, we equate being a follower of Jesus with being a good church member: someone who participates in the church's mission, gives of their financial resources and their time, leads the *organization* of the church in ways that help sustain it year-after-year. And that's great.

But the basic truth of the matter is that what Jesus came here to do was not found a new religion, or create an institution, but to save the world...and change the world...and love the world into the vision that God had for it since the beginning.

You might say it was the most aggressive party platform in history: to usher the Kingdom of God into a world that was broken and hurting.

Jesus started a movement.

And the movement has continued throughout the decades and the centuries because people like you and me have decided to join...to follow Jesus...to be his disciples; to have God enlist our gifts and passions for the sake of that Kingdom that Jesus came to usher in.

And the question that is on my heart this morning is why?



Why do we follow Jesus?

For what reasons do we decide to be Jesus' disciples?

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In our scripture readings this morning, from the Old and the New Testaments, we have heard many different ways that people – ordinary people like you and me – found themselves on the journey of faith.

Knowing what I know about this congregation, I suspect that many of you are like me in that your “choice” to follow Jesus was kind of like Simon Peter’s. Simon Peter heard about Jesus through his brother, Andrew. For Simon Peter, following Jesus was connected to following in the footsteps of someone he trusted. That’s how I came to faith – through the leading of my family who were already followers of Jesus. I am a Christian because it is the way I was raised. My parents decided to follow Jesus because their parents encouraged it. Being a Christian never felt like a decision that I made – it was part of what it meant to grow up as a Peery. Like many of you, I am raising my kids with that same kind of expectation.

And that is a wonderful way to enter the path of discipleship.

But maybe you are more like Samuel in the story that Katelyn read from the Old Testament. Maybe, like Samuel, it took you a little longer to recognize your call to follow God. God called to Samuel three times – and it took the encouragement of a close-to-retirement pastor named Eli – for him realize his purpose in being a disciple. I’ve met a few of you for whom this is the story: sometimes it takes persistence for God to wake you up; sometimes it takes other people to help you discover what kind of life God is inviting you to live.

And that is a wonderful way to enter the pathway of discipleship.

Perhaps you are lucky enough to have an experience like Philip. Philip has a direct, dramatic encounter with Jesus, right there on the side of the road that led to Galilee. Jesus says “follow me” and Philip does. Bada-bing-bada-bing. Philip’s experience might sound rather strange and radical to a bunch of conventional Presbyterians, but this kind of conversion happens all the time. That kind of intense, experience of Christ is the way many people in our world come faith.

And it, too, is a wonderful way to enter the pathway of discipleship.

More and more, though, our culture is filled with people like Nathaniel.

A friend of mine calls Nathaniel the “patron saint of skeptics.” Nathaniel hears about Jesus from Philip, who tells him that this is the man about whom the prophets spoke; that he is the son of Joseph of Nazareth...that is, he is of the lineage of King David. But Nathaniel isn’t sold. He’s not sure he wants to follow.



“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

You probably have a friend or two like Nathaniel.

You might even have a Nathaniel in your family.

After I graduated with that political science degree from college and realized I didn't want to go to law school, I took a job working for Habitat for Humanity in Asheville where my boss was a Nathaniel. Lew was his name. Brilliant guy. Kind. Committed to the well-being of those who were most vulnerable. But, boy, was he a skeptic when it came to faith. When Lew found out that I was heading to seminary to be a pastor, we started going to lunch on a regular basis and he would let me have it.

“Why spend your time serving an institution that just helps shelter and protect people from real world?”

“How can you say you care about racial equality and then spend your career working for an organization that is one of the most segregated in the country?”

“How frustrated are you going to be by working with a bunch of hypocrites?”

“Why not spend your career investing in something that will make an impact?”

Every time we talked, it was as if Lew was asking the same question: “Can anything good come out of the church?”

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There are a lot of people like Lew.

Lots of Nathaniels – who are skeptical about following this teacher named Jesus because they've got a bad impression about his church.

And it's not that they're 100% wrong: the church isn't perfect, its pews and its pulpits are full of hypocrites, and sometimes we do misunderstand our role to be Christ's hands and feet in the world...too easily believing that church is just a place where we can feel safe and secure and sheltered from the ugly things we would rather avoid.

But if I were going to grab lunch again with Lew, the question I would ask he and every other Nathaniel is where they got the idea that the church is supposed to be perfect, and without hypocrisy, and a place that makes one happy, or a way of thinking that supplies all the answers to life's questions, or an organization that delivers the most efficient delivery of social services.

Because that's not what Jesus offers those who follow him, and it's not what we really want, either.



Deep down, we don't want promises.

We don't want guarantees.

We don't want appeals to our self-interest.

That's what politicians – and political parties – try to give us to win our votes.

It's morning in America.

I still believe in a place called hope.

Yes, we can.

Make America great again.

Those slogans may sound good, but no politician and no political party can deliver those goods.

No, deep down, we don't want promises.

We don't want programs.

We want a relationship.

We want truth.

We want to belong.

And that is what Jesus offers.

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Regardless of which path we take to get there, whether it is direct (like Philip), nurtured by family (like Simon Peter), marked by persistence (like Samuel), or even infused with skepticism (like Nathaniel), the beauty of Jesus' description of the Christian life – this journey of being a disciple – is not that he pitches a party platform – but that he approaches us with a question that gets us to explore our deepest need: *“what are you looking for?”*

And then, because it's actually impossible to fully describe what a relationship or the truth or belonging look like, there is the invitation: *Come and see.*

What will it mean for me to follow in the footsteps of Jesus? Come and see...

Where will following Jesus take me? Come and see...

How will being a follower of Jesus make a difference to the world around me? Come and see...

Why would I push through my questions, my reservations, and my doubts to follow this man from Nazareth who now has a church? Come and see...

St. Augustine, the early church father, is quoted as saying, “it is solved by walking.”



That's the invitation to the Christian life.

We don't evaluate it.

Weigh it against other options.

We live it. We walk it. We experience it.

We don't fully understand the implications.

We aren't promised success, or security, or days without difficulty or heartache.

But we are invited into a life with meaning.

And purpose.

And the companionship of others with whom we walk along...most importantly, the relationship we have with Christ who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Tomorrow we honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.

And, I know, when a preacher mentions Martin Luther King in a sermon there is always the risk that people in church will roll their eyes and think, "I can never be Dr. King." Maybe not. But there was a time when Martin Luther King, Jr. wasn't a household name. There was a time when he was not the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, not a man who met with presidents, not a man who drew hundreds of thousands of people from across the country to hear speak in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, not a man with his own monument in our nation's capitol.

There was a time when he was simply a 26-year-old parish pastor in Montgomery, Alabama who was asked to join a bus boycott and said yes.

"Come and see," they said. And he did. He took a step into the future that God had waiting for him. He helped along Jesus's agenda of loving this world into the vision of what God intended from the beginning.

Later in his life, Dr. King said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you can't see the whole staircase."

What is your next step in this journey of following Jesus?

What are you looking for?



Where do you sense that God might use your gifts for the good of God's kingdom?

I'm not altogether sure what might come from that journey.

But I'm glad to be on it with you.

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Let us pray: Guide our feet, O God, while we follow your Son, our Lord. And give us courage for the journey – to come...and see what you doing in this world. And where you would have us join you. Encourage us – that we might encourage others who yearn for connection and relationship and truth and purpose...all of which we find in the gift of Jesus...the way, the truth, the life. Amen.

