

Sermon Jan. 2 - Come and See – John 1:35-51

Come and see. When John's disciples start following Jesus, Jesus asks them, What are you looking for? They answer with a question – Where are you staying? And Jesus says come and see. And it spreads from there. Andrew invited Peter. Then Jesus invited Phillip and Phillip invited Nathanael. Come and see. At this point, none of the disciples really knows what to expect.

And Jesus doesn't really tell them what to expect. He says "you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Do you think the disciples had any idea what the heck that meant? But there's something about Jesus that makes them believe he could be the Messiah the prophets pointed to.

Come and See. An invitation. No details. Certainly no threats. Just Come and see. It had to have been pretty exciting. If Jesus really is the Messiah this is really good news to the disciples. They want on board.

Often this passage gets preached as encouragement for us to issue that invitation to others. It's a popular evangelism text. While I hope that you do have the courage to invite someone to come and see – to get to know Jesus – I want to go a little different direction. I want us to hear it as an invitation to us...to come and see...to pretend we don't already know how the story ends...because the reality is, we aren't at the end of the story yet.

This is our third time through John in the narrative lectionary. And obviously, over the years, we've read at least parts of John many times. And really, we've heard Jesus' story many, many times. It can be pretty tempting to just say, here we go again...I've heard this before. Is there anything new? How do we capture some of the excitement of those first disciples?

One of the biggest anxieties in the church right now as a whole is declining numbers...fewer members...members who attend less frequently. The number one reason people who haven't previously been in the church show up is if someone invites them – someone who says come and see.

But do we have a handle on what we would invite them to come and see? Do we experience something when we come to worship that we believe others might want? Do we experience something in our life of faith outside of worship that we think others might want? Does your love for God and God's love for you ooze out into the world around you? When people can see Jesus in you, things change. And one of the most profound things that will change is your ability to see Jesus in others. Because that's truly what John's gospel is very much about.

One of the themes of John is the idea that God and Jesus are one with each other and the Spirit and they are one with us. John's gospel is the only one that talks about the coming of the Holy Spirit to live in us...to be a part of our physical being. That's pretty exciting.

But we have a way of putting up so many barriers that we can't even see God in ourselves, let alone someone else. I think before we can invite others to come and see, we need to be able to see.

And what we need to be able to see is Christ's presence in us...in you. And we need to be able to see Christ in the world, not just in here. When we looked at John's prologue, the Word made flesh, we talked about how the breath of God, or life of God, or Spirit of God was breathed into creation from the Big Bang and continues to this day. God created humans in the image of God and continues to breath life in all of creation. Christ is the light who came into the world to enlighten everyone.

Father Richard Rohr talks about a Christ-soaked universe...a Christ-soaked world. That's what we are invited to come and see. I work in the church. I spend a lot of my time trying to discern how to make Christ's presence known in our worship and learning and service. But where the presence of Christ really needs to be seen is out in the world. We can be the people in whom others see Christ.

But to do that, we first need to see Christ in ourselves. And then we will also need to see Christ in others...and even in the non-human creation.

What could be different if people who confess their faith in Jesus Christ and guidance by the Holy Spirit treated all of creation as infused with the presence of God? I think in this time and place, that's our invitation to come and see. Come and see the world and all its creatures, human and non-human, as infused with the presence of God.

So, what are some practical ways to make ourselves open to this kind of seeing?

Perhaps first is to take a look at some of what clogs our ability to see. Perhaps one of the most important things we need to do is pay attention to our reactions to other people. Intense reactions to others are often a clue to something in ourselves that is clogging our vision. I'm not really talking here about someone who has truly harmed us. That has to be worked through too, but what I'm mostly talking about is people whose opinions and worldviews we can't stand.

We live in this time of intense connectivity to the world through 24/7 news networks, radio, the internet. All that gives us an ever-expanding opportunity to encounter people to hate. I'm not going to go into much detail about that. But I will say this - hatred is not compatible with being a follower of Jesus. If you regularly experience feelings of intense outrage and even near hatred from things you see on your favored news source or online, you need to do something different. It will block your ability to see Christ...in yourself or in anyone else.

So, what are some positive actions we can take to make us more open to seeing? I'll share some things that I've found helpful and things I've learned about. But I'm also interested in what you've found that helps you see the presence of Christ in the world. I might be a bit of a broken record. But it really comes down to our spiritual practices. Worship is one. But that's a very small chunk of your week. In this New Year, if you don't already have a personal daily devotional practice, start one. Here are some ideas.

Read John's gospel all the way through. You don't have to do it all in one sitting, but do it in a short enough span that you can kind of hold the story together. John's gospel has some of the most beautiful stories and images. And make sure your translation is a reasonably easy one to understand. I'll send some suggestions with next week's eNews. There are free websites where you can find multiple translations. If there are passages you encounter as you read it that you particularly like, write them down. Then, each day as part of your own devotion time, read one. Read it two or three times. Note what word or phrase stands out to you. Then think about why it does and how it might connect to your life. If you like to journal or want to try, write it down.

Try some kind of meditative practice. I often use centering prayer. But another I find easier and quite helpful is taking walks that have no goal other than paying attention. Maybe you take a walk and say today I'm going to pay attention to everything I see that's red...or looks cozy...or notice the different shapes of leaves or cool porch decorations. That's called mindfulness and it has all sorts of benefits emotionally and spiritually. You don't necessarily have to think about seeing God in those things. Just the act of paying attention to that which is present to you in the moment helps you start to see God in the world.

Over the next couple of weeks, I'll make some resources and ideas available. I'd love it if you'd offer some you've found helpful. Jesus invites us to come and see. We may think we've already seen what Jesus wants us to see. But too often we just see Jesus for an hour or so on Sunday morning. Our invitation this year is to move beyond that. Can we see Jesus in ourselves? Can we trust the promise of the incarnation – that God truly is living in our very hearts, bodies, and souls – that we are infused with God?

Can we see the world through the eyes of God? Can we see all the earth and its creatures as worthy of the salvation Christ brought? As we begin our trek through John's gospel, as we begin a new year, that ancient invitation is the same...come and see.