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“Come and See”

John 1: 29-42

We've got a problem. We've set out on this quest to reach out to new people, except most of us don't like talking about our faith very much. This whole "evangelism" concept doesn't come easily to us in the mainline traditions like ours.

Except it also seems like the words we're used to, of church and religion and tradition, and so on, just don't mean much to the folks we're trying to reach. Even though people are searching for God's presence, for many people, when they hear someone start to tell them about Jesus, they stop listening. Those old words just aren't quite enough anymore.

Last week, we heard the story of Jesus' baptism, when, the gospels tell us, God's Spirit descended from heaven and rested on Jesus, and God's voice said, "This is my beloved Son." We read a version of this story in each of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but in John, we don't get to see the baptism itself. Instead, we hear about it secondhand the next day – before Jesus even has a chance to speak, John is telling *his* story! He is proclaiming to all who will listen that this is the Lamb of God, and knows this because he saw God's Spirit descending on Jesus, and he saw God's Spirit remain on him. John says, *I myself* have seen and I have *testified* that this is the Son of God.

Now we don't talk much about testimony in our tradition, either. It seems like mostly we prefer to keep our hard times to ourselves, and so we don't speak much about the things that pull us up from those hard times. But I think we've all got stories. That one person who called at the right time and said something that brightened your whole day; one friend who dropped by every week for months, or years, when you just needed someone to talk to; one book you read that changed the way you thought about the world. Stories, moments, that we hold onto and look back on and remember.

Even if we don't think about them as "God stories," these special times are little snapshots of the holy that break through into our lives in times that might feel totally ordinary, or totally un-holy. We can have these glimpses of transcendence in a breathtaking landscape, in a moment of silent prayer, in a person's face when we truly see one another. Our God has a way of doing that – of bursting into our lives when we least expect it.

In fact, that's exactly what we just celebrated on Christmas. Our most holy God exploded into our ordinary human lives by being born in a fragile, human body, in the tiny town of Bethlehem, to an unmarried girl and a carpenter from Nazareth.

Just a few verses after we stopped reading from John, Phillip tells Nathaniel that he has met the Messiah, and it is Jesus of Nazareth; and Nathaniel says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" This is a thoroughly ordinary place, the very last place he would expect to meet the Son of God incarnate. But Phillip simply says, "Come and see."

And then John tells his own story to witness to this completely unexpected moment of divinity that is Jesus Christ – because the simple words don't make much sense on their own. "God was born in Bethlehem!" "The carpenter's boy from Nazareth is actually divine!" In the words of high school English teachers everywhere, we need to "show, not tell."

So John says, to all who will listen, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." I saw this, he says! The word that John preaches is no special message given to him from on high. It begins, simply, with something he saw. He says, I did not believe it myself, but I saw God's Spirit with my own eyes, and now I am convinced that this is the truth. And seeing does not require some special training or a fancy degree – we all perceive the world around us: we see it, we hear it, we touch it, smell it, we taste God's movement in the world.

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"What are you looking for?" Jesus asks. And these disciples seem not to answer: "Where are you staying?" they ask. Or maybe that is an answer; how do we find you? We are looking for you! Are you the one we are looking for? And by way of answer, Jesus says, "Come and see." That is, see for yourself. Come and see. And if these disciples-to-be, one of whom doesn't even get a name, if *they* are invited to see for themselves, how much is each of us invited to experience God's work in the world and to testify to it.

Because what makes John a prophet is not just what he saw, what he heard, but the fact that he told his story to others. We all have that potential, we can all witness the holy things around us, but in these simple words, "Come and see," we are also invited to witness *to* the things we see. To speak our stories aloud.

The role of prophets has always been to tell stories; both the prophet's own stories and the stories they have heard and witnessed from others. For John's disciples, it was enough to hear what John saw for them to leap up and follow Jesus. But their stories didn't end there. Jesus' invitation, "Come and see," this is an invitation not just for them to verify what John has told them. It is an invitation to nothing less than dinner with Emmanuel, to sit down with God-with-us. These disciples are invited to open up their eyes and see the holiness in their midst. And then, what they saw and felt there was enough for them to believe, for Andrew to run and get his brother Simon and bring him to Jesus as well.

When we proclaim that Jesus is our Lord, that this man Jesus is of one essence with God the creator of the universe, we are continuing to tell this story: that our God is a God who bursts through the boring and mundane, and shines the light of the Divine into every corner of our very ordinary world. That our God lives and breathes among us, present for each one of us to see. So, come! And see!

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This weekend, we celebrate the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Like John the Baptist, like so many prophets before and after him, he saw what was going on in his community and his country, and he spoke about it. He said, this is what I have seen, and with that he inspired other women and men to stand up and say, yes, and this is what *I* have seen. To say, let me tell you about my own experience.

And even though he was a part of some major successes, the tangible work of legal integration and civil rights legislation, he is remembered today as much for the way he touched the hearts of people around the world and inspired us to be better people.

But he never stopped listening to the stories of people he met. In 1967, several years after the work he is best known for, he announced the launch of a Poor People's Campaign at a meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, known as the SCLC. He called the Poor People's Campaign the "second stage of the Civil Rights movement," which would address the problems of poverty across lines of race.

The campaign sought nothing less than full employment, affordable housing for all, and equal educational opportunities for the poor. But Martin Luther King was assassinated just as this ambitious campaign was getting off the ground, and in the climate of chaos and hopelessness that followed his murder and then Robert Kennedy's assassination just two months later, this last dream was left to die.

The SCLC had gone ahead with their plan to set up a tent city on the Washington Mall, an encampment of poor people they called Resurrection City. They hoped to show how enormous the problem of poverty was for this country – the sheer *number* of people of all races who would be there to say, in King's words, "We are here, we are poor, we don't have any money; you have made us this way, and we've come to stay until you do something about it." That others might see, and understand. They had lived with these stories of poverty themselves, and they knew that nothing would change unless and until these stories were told.

But as much as we like to tell ourselves that Dr. King's work is done, most of those stories have still gone unheard. His own Poor People's Campaign fell apart soon after his death, but the work of seeking equal rights for the poor has continued. In 1998, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign was formed, bringing together poor activists from across the country to carry on the banner raised by King.

In 2011, groups of young people crushed by debt and older people still suffering from unemployment gathered in similar camps, calling themselves Occupy, telling the modern story of income inequality and corporate control. The camps are gone but the work continues; buying up medical debt in order to forgive it, using volunteer networks to support those stranded by Hurricane Sandy in housing projects left for weeks without power or gas.

But 46 years after King recognized the need to tell the story of poverty in America, most of us still have not really heard this story. Jesus' question hits hard: "Do you have eyes, and fail to see?"

Of course, this is easier said than done. There are some stories that can be really tough to hear. Especially if we think those stories might mean something has to change. But even the beautiful stories are hard to see sometimes, too. It is all too easy just to keep to ourselves, to hide in the safe things and the everyday things. When really looking means we might find either great beauty or great pain, accepting Jesus' invitation, "Come and see," starts to feel like a really big deal.

But if we don't look, we're going to miss something. We'll miss the pain and need, certainly, but we

will also miss that sparkle of the divine in a connection with a stranger, a moment with a friend, a solitary walk in prayer. We might even miss a glimpse of our God, incarnate in a poor carpenter's son.

Our God has a habit of doing this, of breaking in on the most boring things. And it's easy for us to get caught up in the rhythms and routines of our lives, and forget to look below the ordinary surface of people or objects. But there is – almost always! – something pulsing with life and with God if we can look up and brush the dust off.

A friend of mine who lives in New York was riding the subway home the other day, feeling grumpy and stressed out and exhausted, sitting on this busy rush-hour train with her head in her hands. She heard something and looked up – and there's a small boy, 3 or 4 years old, channeling his inner wizard: gesturing and waving his arms at her, complete with sound effects, sending her a bit of his superpowers. She looked, and blinked, and broke out into a grin. His eyes lit up – the spell worked! So he conjured a bit more for good measure, and she smiled wider.

God doesn't usually parade around these days in a flowing robe with a blinking neon sign – I AM GOD – although I suppose God might if the context were right. Sometimes divine messengers are radicals in tent cities, sometimes small children with dreams of magic, sometimes the poor folks on the corner or even a fiery preacher like John the Baptist. In each of them and in each of us, Jesus' invitation is sent out, in quiet words and in loud joyous words and in the actions that make God's love real for us: come with me. Come and see for yourself.