

“See And Be Seen” - John 1:29-42

On several Sundays in Advent we encountered John the Baptist, and in those encounter we saw him in the way that most people would describe him and in a way that was familiar to us. However, just when we think we know someone, we often are surprised to see a totally different side of them. For example, just when we thought we knew John the Baptist, the images we have built up over the years are blown away. All this time we were sure we knew John the Baptist as a rough, tough, hair-shirt-wearing, strange-food-eating, cranky and miserable old curmudgeon, storming in out of self-imposed exile in the desert and blasting everyone in sight with vitriolic condemnation.

But just when we thought we knew John the Baptist and all his cranky ways, here in John’s gospel we meet a much different, a kinder, gentler John the Baptist. Here he is no longer the cranky wierdo prophet, dressed in outrageous clothing, eating disgusting food, and whipping the people into submission with stinging words. John the Evangelist presents John the Baptist as a sensitive – almost sophisticatedly urbane - prophet, clear about the visions presented to him by God, and concerned to convey the prophetic messages that Jesus is the Lamb of God and the Son of God.

We must be clear ourselves that this counter-introduction to John the Baptist is no fleeting meeting set in a few words and then moving him off stage. John the Evangelist devotes ten full verses to this introduction, making sure that we know who John the Baptist is, or more precisely and more importantly who he is not. He is not the Messiah; he is not Elijah returned; he is not even “the prophet”, whoever “the prophet” was supposed to be. “I’m just the forerunner,” the Baptist honestly and humbly answers his own questioners, setting a framework for trust in what follows.

Then, once we have been properly introduced to John the Baptist, he then in turn introduces Jesus. John the Baptist goes to great lengths to make sure his own disciples understand that the one upon whom the spirit not only descends upon but remains upon is indeed the Lamb of God, the one sent to take away the sins of the world, the Son of God, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. He repeats himself, signaling that it’s an important subject. What John is so eager to repeat to make sure we notice and remember is the recognition that the Holy Spirit remained upon (abided with – more on that in a moment) Jesus. No light kiss, not a quick tag, not a momentary mission, but a constant and permanent abiding in and with and upon.

Having introduced us to John the Baptist, and then through him introduced Jesus, John the Evangelist now introduces to us the first of those who would become Jesus’ disciples. In the same way that we see in this gospel a John the Baptist who is different from the one presented in the other gospels, here we have a description of those first two – Andrew and Simon (Peter) – that is quite different from the two fishermen suddenly dragged from their boats and nets in Matthew’s version. As John puts it, “The next day John again was standing with two of *his* disciples...” Even from that brief introduction we see a different John ... whether you picture a scholarly group clustered outside the library at a seminary, or a group of friends by the kitchen door at a coffee hour, or a group just “hangin” the expression ‘standing with’ instantly conveys an image of association, of sharing, of togetherness.

What happens next is therefore by contrast most unusual, and highlights the unique nature of this Jesus. The two that were hanging with John the Baptist start to follow Jesus – not in that classic wide-eyed, unquestioning, “I will follow Jesus” mode, but instead tailing him like inept spies. It’s obvious that they were not anything like trained agents, because Jesus ‘makes’ them right away, and confronts them, not with a confrontational and argumentative, “You lookin’ at me??!” but with an even deeper and more profound challenge: “What are you looking for?”

“What are you looking for?”, Jesus asks them, and in return the two ask the most curious question, “where are you staying?” That seems like a very odd question in return, but if we hear that phrased instead, “where are you abiding?” we will, as John expects we will, immediately hear the fuller reply from Jesus, “I will abide with you forever ... I will abide in you, and you in me.” Here in this introduction, however, Jesus replies to them with the simple, “come and see.” And they did.

Went and saw, that is. And more than that, they stayed. They remained, they abided. So much so that one of the two (and it's nice from a Presbyterian perspective that it was Andrew) remained with Jesus throughout his ministry. He remained with Jesus as a disciple (one "under the discipline of", or a follower), and later as an apostle (one who is sent) up until his own death. More than that, Andrew in turn introduced his brother Simon to Jesus, who renamed him Peter, recognizing the staying power of a rock in him (Petros is the Greek word for 'rock').

What a wonderful, fully-packed little text, isn't it? In a few short paragraphs we meet John the Baptist, who testifies to Jesus as the Son of God, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We are introduced more fully to Jesus, and we meet the first of those who would remain with him to the end, and beyond. With repetition and re-emphasis John the evangelist drives home the point about the power of the Holy Spirit remaining with Jesus, the disciples remaining with him, and reminds us of the promises of Jesus to remain with, to abide in us. It is a powerful story, one that stays with us.

The question that Jesus asked those first two disciples is the same powerful question he asks us, "what are you looking for?" What are you looking for in life? That's a tough question, isn't it? When we actually give it some thought, we can come up with a list that probably includes success, happiness, comfort, peace, and similar good things. But at the heart of it I think we tend to look for something deeper, more meaningful – that there is some relevance to life, that it means something, and that we in turn mean something. We are looking to be taken seriously, to be accepted, to be loved. And not just to be loved, but to be loved unconditionally, to be accepted even with all our faults and human frailties, to be forgiven and loved totally. We are looking to be invited in, to be welcomed with open arms.

Those first two disciples were invited in by Jesus' response ... "come and see." And they accepted that invitation. They went with Jesus, and began to see for themselves the power of the Holy Spirit at work in him, evident not only in the words he spoke but in the actions of grace and mercy that he performed. They stayed with him, not just overnight as here in the beginning, but throughout the next few exciting and challenging years as Jesus proclaimed forgiveness of sins through God's grace. Those disciples, and others, came and saw the miracles, the healing, the restoration of sanity and self-worth to countless people touched by this Lamb of God, this Messiah. They came and they saw how they themselves were transformed, lifted up, made whole, redeemed before God, and they dedicated their lives to passing on that powerful invitation, to "come and see".

As we begin to realize that what we are looking for is acceptance, forgiveness, being acknowledged as a person, being invited in and welcomed, perhaps we can also begin to realize that others are looking for those very things as well. Perhaps we can also hear that as we have been accepted and invited in and welcomed by Christ, the Lamb of God, we are called to be seen to extend that same acceptance and inviting and welcoming to others.

Sadly, too many people accept that invitation but then immediately become bouncers at the door of the heavenly party, turning away all those who they think don't have the right tickets. The first disciples who were invited by Christ to come and see were not hired as bouncers – think about Jesus' response to them as they chided him for talking to the woman at the well – they were invited in, accepted, forgiven, and charged with inviting others in. The most recent disciples who were invited in by Christ – and those most recent disciples would include you and me – are likewise accepted, forgiven, and charged with inviting others in. It's now our turn to ask others "what are you looking for?" and as they too realize that most of all they want to be accepted and loved we can issue the same invitation that we received – come and see for yourself what the love of God in Christ is really like, and then be seen for the loving, caring, person of worth you are as you extend that same love to others in Christ's name.