

- 1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20) •
- Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 •
- 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 •
- John 1:43-51

Sermon for January 17, 2021

Sermon Title:

COME AND SEE

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The other three Gospel writers skip very briefly over the relationship Jesus had with his earliest disciples at the very beginning. Matthew, Mark and Luke basically all simply say that Jesus just called to them and they got up and followed.

But John's Gospel gives us a richer, fuller account of that early recruitment, and it contains several incidents. One of those incidents is described in our Gospel reading for today.

Jesus and his very earliest followers, probably including Peter and Andrew and James and John, has apparently returned to Galilee from having spent time with John the Baptist at the Jordan River. Now back in Galilee, Jesus has begun to attract new followers. One of those new followers is Philip, and Philip, full of enthusiasm about the new teacher, tells his friend, Nathaniel, about him, and adds that's he's from the little town of Nazareth just up the way. When Nathaniel hears that the new young preacher is from Nazareth, he scoffs, and quotes what was apparently a proverb at that time in Israel: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? To which the only reply Philip can make is: Come and see.

Come and see.

Those three words, in a nutshell, summarize what we might call the order of Christian faith. First you come, and then you see. It's never the opposite: See, and then come. It's always, come, and then see.

Our ordinary experience is full of examples of the wisdom of this order. Look at our beautiful quilts hanging up here behind me. I don't know how many times Carole and

Linda tried to explain to me what quilting is and how it works: sewing this and then gluing that, and then the actual quilting where there's more sewing but you need special equipment, and so on and so on. They were speaking English and so I understood the individual words and sentences, but at the end of it all, I still didn't have the foggiest notion how to make a quilt.

And then one afternoon, I went over to Linda's house along with several others sitting here, and I actually saw a quilt being put together. I came and saw. And I began to understand.

While I'm making lunch, I enjoy watching an old show on the Create channel called Bob Ross's Joy of Painting. Some of you are probably familiar with it. It originally ran back in the '80's I believe. Bob Ross is a very soft-spoken guy with a comical-looking Afro, who completes a complete landscape painting starting from scratch in the space of half an hour, showing you exactly how it's done.

All my life, painting has always been an utter mystery to me. For all I knew, painters just took a hundred or so different brushes, put a little paint on each, and then dabbed each one on the canvas wherever the little brush strokes need to go.

But then I started watching Bob Ross at lunchtime.

I'll never be an artist, but at least now I have some rough idea of how the whole process works. Was it because I read a book about painting? No, it was because Bob Ross came on TV and showed me.

And so on, We could imagine a thousand examples.

The point is, the order of belief or faith for a Christian is always like that: Come, and see. If your faith rests on anything less secure than that, it's like a house whose foundation has been built on sand.

This is a particularly important message for those whose faith rests on their intellect, on having reasoned their way to belief.

I once heard about a professor of religion at a university who boasted of never having gone to church, but who could still convincingly argue for the truth of Christianity. He regularly invited leading atheists to campus to engage him in a public debate, at the end of which the audience would pick the winner. And he always won.

That is until one time he invited someone who was just as clever and glib as he was himself. And at the end of the debate, the audience picked her as the winner.

The professor reportedly felt like he had been deflated, and all the security of his life was gone. He became a sort of diminished individual, and faded back into academic obscurity.

His problem was that his faith was purely theoretical. He needed to see first, before he would come.

Nathaniel, in our story, seems to have been someone like that. Not that he was a prideful professor or anything along those lines. But his beliefs had clearly been formed and shaped by the intellectual environment of the time and place in which he lived. That intellectual environment was provided by the sacred Hebrew scriptures and the interpretation of those scriptures on the part of various learned religious scholars down through the centuries.

According to those teachings, the Messiah, when he came, would come in power, with pomp and circumstance, sweeping all away before him. And the Scriptures said nothing whatever about his being a Nazarene, about his coming from Nazareth. On the contrary, it's common, proverbial knowledge that Nazareth contains nothing but fools and failures. And so when Philip, his friend, comes to him with his amazing news, Nathaniel's response is one of intellectual condescension. He scoffs: Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Philip must have been a smart man, because he realized the pointlessness of trying to argue with his friend. Nothing he could point to in the Hebrew Scriptures or the teachings of the elders would win an argument and convince Nathaniel. All he can say is what Our Gospel writer reports him saying: Come and see.

I remember a Christmas movie from long ago. At the climax of the movie, the disillusioned little girl heroine wanders sadly outside her home on Christmas Eve, Something catches her attention and she looks up, and sure enough, up on the roof is a jolly old fellow with a long beard, getting back into a sleigh being pulled by reindeer. She rushes back inside and tries to persuade her father that Santa is on the roof. He's sitting in his armchair, smoking his pipe and reading the newspaper, and he scolds her, and tells her she's old enough now to put aside that childish nonsense. But she keeps pleading and pleading – Come and see! Please come and see! – and finally he gets up grouchy and goes outside, and, sure enough, he looks up and sees Santa and reindeer perfectly outlined against a full moon. And Santa turns and waves and says, “Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas, Waldo!” or whatever the father's name was. And of course, the father becomes a believer.

Similarly with Nathaniel. When he actually meets Jesus, his reaction is “You **are** the king of Israel!” Just as when I saw Linda and the others working on the quilt, my reaction was, “Oh, now I get it! Now I see!”

The first instruction Jesus always gives is, “Follow me.” It's never, “Let's sit down and I'll explain God to you and how this whole system of salvation works.” It's always, simply, follow me. Get to know me first, otherwise all the teaching will be meaningless.

And so that's our rule number one for building a Christian life: first get to know Jesus. That's the firm foundation. Come and see him; spend time with him; follow him.

But the question for arises for us: how do we do that? For Nathaniel and the other apostles it meant something pretty straightforward: Get up, come along, and I'll introduce you. But what does it mean for us – two thousand years later – to come and see Jesus?

Jesus himself recognized the difficulty. After the resurrection, John records something Jesus said to Thomas in the upper room, after Thomas had personally experienced the resurrected Christ. Here's what Jesus said:

“Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

That's us. That's you and me. For those who cannot physically see Jesus, what does it mean, to come and see?

Of course, we occasionally hear from people who report having had a powerful personal experience of Jesus, something approaching a physical meeting in its intensity and personal significance. Sainy Paul himself had such an encounter.

As for those who report such experiences, if they're delusions, one pities them; if they're real, one envies them.

But for most of us, including me, coming to see Christ has never manifested itself in that way. Does that mean we are not following the proper order, that our faith is built on sand? Or is there another way to come and see?

On the authority of Scripture, I can tell you that the answer is, Yes, you can meet and know Jesus without ever having had the transcendent experience of Paul and the others who report something similar.

Here's how: Do something in the spirit of Christ.

When you parachute from an airplane, you are experiencing what others have experienced in parachuting from an airplane. Your spirit is now familiar with their spirit.

When you eat a banana, you are experiencing what others have experienced in eating a banana. Your spirit is now familiar with their spirit in that regard.

Jesus told us, over and over, how to become familiar with his own spirit. Share his experience. As he himself put it: Love one another, as I have loved you.

Spend time in prayer; do an act of charity in secret; most of all, forgive someone; and whenever you do so, do so in the conscious awareness that you are following the example of Jesus. Each time you imitate Christ, you are entering into his spirit, you are experiencing what Christ experienced, and in so doing, you are sharing his experience, and thereby coming to know him.

And so we pray this morning, Father, for the motivation to spend time in coming to know you, and the steady remembrance as we proceed through our daily lives that every act of charity, every embrace of humility, every offer of peace we make to the world, is in imitation of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, in whose name we pray.