

“Come and See”

John 1:29-42

The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

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).

If you were here last Sunday, this story may sound a little bit familiar. Last week we heard Matthew’s account of the baptism of Jesus, and today the lectionary gives us John’s version.

Matthew tells the story in the moment, as it happens. In Matthew’s story—you’ll remember this—John is on the banks of the Jordan River, baptizing crowds of people, and Jesus comes to him to be baptized. After a brief exchange about who ought to be baptizing whom, John consents, and Jesus plunges into the river. When he comes up from the water, the Spirit descends upon him like a dove, and the heavens split open, and the voice of God can be heard, saying, “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Last week, we claimed this story, this name, this affirmation from God, received by every person as he or she is baptized.

This week, John's gospel tells a similar story, but this story is retold after the fact, narrated by the one who did the baptizing. Obviously, these dramatic riverside events made an impression on John the Baptist, for in today's passage, he recounts them to his disciples emphatically. He doesn't just hint at it, or mention it in passing, or mumble something under his breath. No, the scripture says he declared, he exclaimed, he testified. It's the telling of the story, almost more than the events themselves, that is lifted up in this version. Not that the baptism isn't important—but what John's gospel focuses on here is the way that story was recounted, and the effect its telling had.

John the Baptist knew that he was to prepare the way for one greater than he. He knew that his mission was to point toward someone else, to precede the one on whom God's Spirit would descend, to play a part in revealing that Anointed One. So when Jesus came up from the waters, and that dove appeared, and God's voice echoed in the heavens, John knew that he had found the one he was looking for—and he couldn't keep it to himself, but spread the word to anyone who would listen.

John the Baptist told his story more than once. Apparently, he was so moved by that experience at the Jordan River that from that day forward, whenever he saw Jesus, he told the people around him what he had witnessed. He tells it twice in the span of this morning's reading. The first time, we aren't told who John's audience was—it could have been his friends, or his family, or a crowd of unknown strangers. In the second part of today's reading, we are told that John was with two of his disciples when he exclaimed what he knew about Jesus' identity. "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" And when they heard him, when they heard the conviction in his voice and saw the emotion on his face, they followed Jesus.

When Jesus noticed them, he asked them a very interesting question. "What are you looking for?" Not "How are you?" or "Who are you?" or "Why are you following me?"... but "What are you looking for?" And taking a leaf out of Jesus' own book, Andrew and his companion answered a question with a question. "Rabbi, Teacher, where are you staying?"

The Greek word translated here as *staying* means more than renting a room for the night. It has a sense of depth and permanence to it. It can also be translated as *abiding, dwelling, remaining, enduring*.¹ So when the disciples asked Jesus, "Where are you staying?" they didn't just mean, "Where did you lay your head last night?" or "Could we get a look at your place and see whether you made the bed or put your dirty laundry in the hamper?" They were asking a deeper question, a question that demonstrated what they were really looking for. They were asking where they could encounter Jesus and his magnetic presence, where they could experience the undying power of God's own Spirit, which they had already sensed abiding, dwelling, remaining, enduring in Jesus.

¹ Jan Richardson. "Epiphany 2: Come and See." <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/01/17/come-and-see/>.
Audrey West. "Commentary on John 1:29-42."
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=24.

Jesus answered them, not with a question this time, but with a wonderfully enigmatic phrase: “Come and see.” *Don’t take my word for it, he said. Look around. Check it out. Come and see for yourself.*

Whatever they saw when they went with Jesus to see where he was staying, abiding, dwelling, remaining, enduring, it made quite an impression, just as Jesus’ baptism at the Jordan River had done for John. And the disciples, like John, couldn’t keep it to themselves, but told the story to all who would hear. Once again, it’s the telling of the story, almost more than the events themselves, that is lifted up—the way that story was recounted, and the effect its telling had.

Andrew went to his brother, Simon Peter, and said (or perhaps declared, proclaimed, testified), “We have seen the Messiah!” *We have found what we were looking for, Simon. John wasn’t making it up, Simon. We have found God’s Anointed One, the one who embodies God’s saving power. Come and see!* And Simon came, and looked around, and checked it out, and saw for himself, and joined the movement.

That’s how it all started—with people catching a whiff of God’s presence, a glimpse of God’s promises, and then declaring, proclaiming, testifying to what they knew, and inviting others to come and see. That’s how it all started, and it didn’t stop there, but continued on through the years and across the miles, as followers of Jesus declared the experiences they had had, and proclaimed the visions they had seen, and shared the inspiration they had been given in ways that compelled others to come, to see, to follow.

I can think of no better example of this powerful gospel testimony than the man whose life and legacy we celebrate tomorrow: the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his case, it was a testimony to the inspiration of the Spirit and the vision of a prophet. Dr. King cast a vision of hope so bright that it shined even in the valley of despair. His vision was so compelling that people were drawn to come and see, to join the movement for freedom and equality. His vision was so compelling, his momentum so powerful, that eventually it brought a whole nation along with it.

Listen to these words. Listen to this testimony.

Even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of “interposition” and “nullification” – one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.²

Don't you want to come and see? Don't you want to follow?

John the Baptist testified to what he had seen and what had been promised to him. *Come and see the Son of God!* And people wanted to follow. Andrew testified to what he had experienced and where he had found God's presence. *Come and see the Messiah, the Anointed One!* And people wanted to follow. Martin Luther King testified to hope in the face of despair, to the dream of a world in which all of God's children would be free at last, to a vision that was so real you could taste it. *Come and see the vision of God, the future that is in store for us all!* And people wanted to follow.

And so I wonder today: what is your testimony?

Maybe that word makes you a little nervous, perhaps because of its legal connotations, more likely because of its evangelical connotations... Many of us find the idea of sharing our faith to be an uncomfortable one... But if we have found hope in this place, if we have found joy in this community, if we have found power in these stories, if we have found love in this God, we can share it—we must share it—not as an imposition, but as an offering, a passing-on of the gift we have received.

What is your testimony?

² Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. “I Have a Dream.” August 28, 1963.
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>

Like John the Baptist, it might be a hope you had cherished for a long, long time that finally came true. Like Andrew the Disciple, it might be a person you met who seemed so full of the Spirit that it spilled out and inspired you, too. Like Martin Luther King, it might be a dream God has placed on your heart about how the world will change for the better.

It might be an experience you had when you felt God's presence with you. It might be a time when all seemed lost, but somehow a way forward opened and you were found. It might be tiny, everyday moment that sparkled with God's light.

What is your testimony?

Because that word might make you a little nervous, because many of us find the idea of sharing our faith to be an uncomfortable one, let's practice together. This is a safe place to try it out. We are among friends, surrounded by more or less like-minded people, in the midst of a community with compatible spiritual inclinations. You need not fear judgment or rejection or offense. Let's give it a try.

For the next few moments, turn to someone near you and tell her about a place where you caught a glimpse of God. Turn to someone near you and tell him about a time when you felt God's presence with you. Turn to someone near you and tell her about a person in whom you sense the Spirit. Turn to someone near you and tell him about a vision you think God has for us and for our world.

You don't have to be as emphatic as John the Baptist. You don't have to be as eloquent as Martin Luther King. But don't just hint at it, or mention it in passing, or mumble something under your breath. Declare; exclaim; paint a picture that will make them want to come and see.

Offer your testimony to someone else, and receive theirs in return, and see if you don't discover something new about that person and about God.

Let's give testimony a try. Here we go.