

Psalm 40:1-11 ~ John 1:29-42

What Are You Looking For?

January 19, 2020 ~ 2nd Sunday after Epiphany ~ Martin Luther King Sunday

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Introduction to Scripture

Again, this week we get to hear the first words Jesus spoke. Last Sunday it was Jesus' first words in Matthew's story, this time it is in John's. Last week, Jesus' first words were convincing John to baptize him, in order "to fulfill all righteousness," despite John the Baptist's resistance and reluctance. Today in John, Jesus' first words on earth begin a dialogue. He starts by engaging in a conversation with two men who started following behind him. And they respond to Jesus, curiously, with another question. To which Jesus answers with an invitation to them to participate. To be a part. A *participant*. That's all John gives us. But it's enough for us to observe Jesus teaching them and us, right out of the gate, what it means to follow Jesus. And it's probably not quite what anyone thought.

Sermon:

"What are you looking for?" A decisive Packer win over the San Francisco 49er's tonight in their play-off game? A knee that lets you walk without wincing in pain? An infusion of hope in a hopeless situation, a miry bog, you are in personally? Maybe you are looking for some hope and progress in our country's political health? Or maybe a service that gets out at 10:30 am? "What are you looking for?" This was the very question that Jesus asked the two disciples of John the Baptist, who wanted to check out the man whom John identified as the Lamb of God. One was Andrew, the other is unidentified. Typical of John's gospel, where so much is left open-ended, opening the door to our imaginations. Unlike the other three gospel writers, John never catalogues or names the twelve disciples at any point in his gospel. In today's story, some scholars guess the second person was the Beloved Disciple. Or perhaps that person could stand for you and for me. An open-ended circle of disciples, expanding across time and continents.

"Where are you staying?" That was their answer to Jesus' question, "What are you looking for?" I don't think they simply meant, "Hey Jesus, are you staying at the Holiday Inn or Hotel Marshfield?" The word "staying" in Greek meant much more. The question meant where are you *remaining*, where are you *abiding*? And Jesus simply replied, "Come and See." This seems more like an invitation story, than a call story. We will have a call story next week to consider. Today's story is an open-ended invitation to participate, to ride along, to walk with. To become a part of something beyond what they have known before. Beyond what they could possibly imagine on their own. And without any indication of what they might be getting into. Still, they went and saw, and then Andrew invited his brother Simon. "You've got to come see him! This is the Messiah!"

They were looking for the Messiah, for Jesus on earth. John saw the Holy Spirit descending and then told everyone, here he is! This is the one. But how do we know when we see Christ? This story shows us how Jesus, from the very beginning, revealed himself through dialogue, relationship, participation. He didn't hand them a set of rules or bylaws. He invited

anyone who was willing into a first-hand experience of being listened to, understood, accepted. That was the starting gate. That's what happens in the presence of Christ. Many people have not had that first-hand experience of unconditional Divine embrace. As the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II has written: "I'm not surprised when I meet people who tell me they're agnostic. When I was a guest on the talk show of one of America's most famous atheists, I told Bill Maher that if you're talking about a god who hates the poor, immigrants, and homosexuals, I'm an atheist too. I don't know that god, and I definitely don't believe in him. But I am an evangelical because as my grandmama use to say, "I know Jesus for myself."ⁱ

If you are looking for Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, John gives us a couple of clues through that name. "Lamb of God" screams "sacrifice" and reminds us of the paschal lamb in the Passover ritual already in place during Jesus' time. The Lamb of God comes to liberate those who are oppressed and marginalized. If we want to follow Jesus, I believe we need to ask that same question, "Where are you staying, today, Jesus? Where are you remaining? Where are you abiding?" Wherever there are displaced, uprooted refugee people fleeing danger and seeking a safe place to stay. Like Mario Perez Domingo, one of the 250,000 Guatemalan migrants who have been apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico Border. As Rachel Nolan reports in her New Yorker article, "Language Barrier:"ⁱⁱ

"At least half of them are Mayans, and speak little or no Spanish, many of them speak Mam. At the U.S. Border Patrol Central Processing Center in McAllen, Texas, Mario Perez Domingo and his two-year-old daughter had been picked up by a Border patrol agent who asked for their papers and then accused Domingo of forging his daughter's birth certificate. The agent asked in Spanish if he had "paid for the certificate," and Domingo said "yes," because Guatemalans pay a small fee to the civil registry for birth certificates. The Border Patrol argued that Domingo had bought it on the black market and that the child was not his daughter and took her away. Domingo did not have the language skills to explain... By the time Oswaldo Vidal Martin who interprets English for migrants who speak his mother tongue, Mam, got involved, Domingo had been transferred from McAllen, so they talked on the phone. In fewer than five minutes, Martin had the facts of the case. The father was reunited with his daughter only after taking a DNA test, a month later, and then both were released."

I believe our gospel lesson is teaching us that Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world is staying with refugees and displaced persons all over the world. A situation that is bound to increase for folks all over the world, particularly in coastal communities, as climate changes continue to make previously congenial living spaces uninhabitable. How can we "come and see" and participate with Jesus in his ministry of presence, of compassion for refugees at our Southern border and all over the world that Jesus came to save? The sin of climate change is a sin of the world, for which we are all responsible.

"Where are you staying, Jesus, today?" Another place is among the women incarcerated in the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor, Washington. It is the largest prison for women in the state and the only one that houses maximum and minimum-security inmates. Lane Brubaker (no relation 😊) was called by the Olympia Presbytery to plant a new

worshipping community there a year ago. As Paul Seebeck tells the story in *The Presbyterian Outlook*,ⁱⁱⁱ Hagar's Community Church in just one year, has 150 women attending worship and 50 attending weekly Bible Study. "She said that they hadn't heard very much about one of the most important tenets of Reformed theology—that one doesn't have to earn God's approval, redemption, or love. "The message that God loves them and that they are more than their worst mistake has been transformative for them," Brubaker said. Before the worshippers takes communion together, Brubaker typically says these words: "On the night Jesus was betrayed by a friend, he was beaten by police. Then he was arrested and tried. Judged guilty, he was incarcerated and executed by the state." She says this approach helps the women see that so much of Jesus' experience is similar to their own. "It's clear to me now that Jesus is saying, 'to find me you have to visit prisons,'" Brubaker said. "We are to find Jesus in prison."

We honor Dr. King today because he went another place where Jesus was and is—into the belly of the beast of racism in our country. He took with him the hope of Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin, the sin of racism, from the world. As James Cone has written in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*,^{iv} "To fight white supremacy openly in the deep South during the 1950's and 60's was unthinkable perilous. When King agreed to act as the most visible leader in the civil rights movement, he recognized what was at stake. In taking up the cross of black leadership, he was nearly overwhelmed with fear. This fear reached a climax on a particular night, January 27, 1956 in the early weeks of the Montgomery bus boycott, when he received a midnight telephone call threatening to blow up his house if he did not leave Montgomery in three days. Later he told how that call created a "spiritual midnight," as he thought about what could happen to him, wife, and newly born baby girl."

"Later recalling this incident, King told how fear drove him from bed to the kitchen where he prayed, "out loud," pleading, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right...But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faulting, I'm losing my courage.'" Yet then, King said he heard a voice, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even to the end of the world."

This echoes what Jesus told John the Baptist by the Jordan 2,000 years earlier in Matthew 3:13-17 when he said, "I have come to fulfill all righteousness." The Lamb of God has said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15:13. That was precisely what King did. And so did a host of others: black, white sacrificed their bodies and lives for our freedom today.

Jesus is still calling us out to "come and see." Calling us to be with Christ: that is what it means to be a church. As Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove put it, "In the Greek of the New Testament, church is *ekklesia*, "the called-out ones." To be called out of the patterns and practices of this world's sinful and broken systems into the economy of God's grace is to become church."^v

In any place "where two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name (Matthew 18:20) there is the potential that the Spirit can empower real people in our real world to interrupt the

patterns we've inherited." On Wednesday, Carolyn Optiz and I were sharing home communion with Margie Fornefelt, who just turned 101 years old on January 6, as we do almost every month. Actually, we were sharing it with Margie and her little Yorkshire Terrier named "Lucky." Carolyn opened our communion service, as we always do with that scriptural promise from Matthew, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be." But this time, Margie looked first at Carolyn and then at me and said, "Yes, he is here--I feel it." Together by twos and threes, and by two hundred and three hundred, in the company of Jesus, alongside the suffering, we can become church.

Let's not wait until we are 101 to say it when we see it. Let's not wait until we are 101 to hold out for the Lamb of God's invitation to "Come and see." Jesus is here, waiting. I will end my sermon today with a prayer, written by Denise Anderson, Coordinator of Racial and Intercultural Justice for our Presbyterian Mission Agency. Let us pray,

Forgive us for imposing our will over yours. Forgive us for our tacit acceptance of injustice and our indifference toward our siblings in the margins. Forgive us for refusing to stay with each other when understanding became difficult. Forgive us for prioritizing our own comfort over an increased capacity to do even greater things. Help us to recommit ourselves to learning each other's languages. Remind us of the power you have given us, and that the best way to reach the highest heights is with each other. Amen.^{vi}

ⁱ Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove, *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion*, (IVP Books, Downers Grove, ILL, 2018), pp. 1-2. (Foreword by Dr. Barber II)

ⁱⁱ Rachel Nolan, "Annals of Immigration: Language Barrier," *The New Yorker*, January 6, 2020, pp. 26-31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Seebeck, "New Worshipping Community Creates a Sanctuary for God's Beloved Exiles," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 13, 2020, p.7.

^{iv} James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2011), See pp. 65-92.

^v *Reconstructing the Gospel*, p.139

^{vi} PC(USA) Denise Anderson, *Mission Yearbook*, January 19, 2020.