



“Come and See”
Scripture – John 1:29-42
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, January 19, 2020

Scene: A summer evening in the early 2000s. Frosty’s Ice Cream. Shell Knob, Missouri.

My family was sitting around one of the picnic tables on the patio of the ice cream stand, enjoying our chocolate dip cones and banana splits and M&M concretes. We were there for, probably, the third time that week. Frosty’s was pretty much the only place in town to go after sundown, when the speedboats were settled into their docks for the night and the jet skis had fallen silent. As usual, we were part of the influx of summer visitors — families, like ours, who came down from St. Louis or Kansas City or Wichita every summer to spend a week or two at Table Rock Lake. When you grow up in the Midwest — a good twelve hours from the ocean — *this* is the next best thing.

We’d only been at Frosty’s a few minutes when three teenaged guys strutted over to our table with the feigned confidence of a highschooler about to ask a girl to the prom. You could tell they felt awkward (poor guys), but — still — they were resolved to perform their Christian duty: “Do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?” they asked.

I don’t think whatever script they’d studied had quite prepared them for our table.

“Well,” my mom started, “I am a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. And my two daughters have just returned from a mission trip. And my daughter-in-law — she’s also a pastor’s kid. So I think we’re set.”

And those three teenaged boys smiled and nodded and murmured a quick, “Oh, I’m glad you’ve heard the good news.” And they walked away looking a little relieved, I think, to have been let off the hook.

“Do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

The idea of asking that question of strangers we meet is enough to make most of us cringe for a multitude of reasons, ranging from downright discomfort to theological disagreement. And yet, bearing witness to the good news of Jesus Christ is central to our tradition. We hear this mandate from the lips of Jesus, himself: “Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15, KJV). And we see quite plainly the importance of testimony in the Gospel of John. From the beginning of this book, it is clear that those who surround Jesus are eager evangelists ... including John the Baptizer. He is introduced earlier in Chapter 1 as a witness. “[John] came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him” (John 1:7).

Even, here, in John's account of the Call of the Disciples, it is the work of *witnesses* — not of Jesus, himself — to draw disciples to the Messiah. Unlike the more familiar 'call narratives' in Matthew, Mark and Luke — in which Jesus calls out some version of the phrase, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" — the Jesus of John's Gospel utters no imperative, no command. He does not even speak. The One introduced as the Word-made-flesh, does not voice a single word in John's text until *after* he notices the first of his disciples following him.

It is John the Baptist — the one sent to testify to the light — who sets this call narrative in motion. "Look!" he says. "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" And, immediately, Andrew and his companion follow Jesus. It is hard to imagine that this claim alone from John would compel two grown men to change course and follow a complete stranger. But — remember — they are already disciples of John. They have been following the Baptizer for some time now: watching as John wades into Jordan to baptize with water so that the Messiah might be revealed; listening as John proclaims the Lord who is to come — the Lord upon whom the Spirit rests. So these two men are watching for the Messiah. And as soon as John the Baptist points — "Look! Here he is!" — Andrew and the other rise to join the man from Nazareth.

But it is these disciple's first encounter with the One they choose to follow that I find so intriguing. Hear the exchange again, this time with words that are a bit closer to the original Greek:

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What do you seek?"
They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you *abiding*?"
He said to them, "Come and see."
They came and saw where he was *abiding*, and they *abided* with him that day.

"Where are you abiding?" they ask. And Jesus replies, "Come and see."

Andrew and the other disciple rise to follow as soon as John the Baptist points out Jesus. But it is not until these two have *abided* with their new Teacher and Lord that they are ready to bear witness to the Messiah in their midst. Only then can these disciples proclaim the good news with personal conviction — not as an echo of another's testimony. After they have "come and seen," after they have spent a day in Jesus' presence, after they have experienced for themselves the abundant life Christ offers — only then are they are ready to go and tell others about the God who abides with us.

And this is exactly what happens next. Andrew immediately runs to his brother and declares: "We have found the Messiah!" And he brings Simon to Jesus so that he, too, can have a relationship with the One who comes that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

So begins a pattern that we see unfold throughout John's Gospel: In the verses that succeed today's passage, Philip becomes a disciple of Jesus and immediately testifies to Nathanael, saying: "Come and see!" And, a few chapters later, the Samaritan woman at the well does the same thing. She spends time with Jesus, drinking deeply of the living water he offers. So amazed is she by her encounter with the Messiah that she runs to fetch others, saying: "Come and see!" As it turns out — other Samaritans heed this woman's testimony and come and see for themselves. After abiding with Jesus for two days — after experiencing firsthand the abundant life Christ offers — they say to the woman: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (John 4:42).

This is how the community of disciples grows: One by one, seeking souls experience the abundant life Christ offers. And then — overwhelmed by grace — they go out and invite others to experience God's grace for themselves. "Come and see," they say. "Come and see."

What if the *church's* witness always carried such an eager and enthusiastic invitation? What if our testimony to the seeking souls *we* encounter in the cafeteria or at the water cooler or across the cubicle wall echoed that refrain from John's Gospel? — "Come and see."

It makes me wonder: What if those teenagers who approached my family's table on that summer evening at Frosty's had posed the question differently? — "We have experienced the abundance of God's grace. Can we tell you our story?" Who knows if we would have listened to their testimony while we ate our chocolate dip cones and concretes? But it would have piqued our curiosity, to say the least.

Or: What would have happened had *we* responded differently? Perhaps: "We *do* know Jesus Christ, but tell us what your faith has meant to you."

It's entirely possible that those three teenaged boys would have shared stories of grace-filled encounters with Christ. Maybe one of them would have said:

When our congregation celebrates communion, I look around and see grandparents with shaky hands serve children who have just been baptized, and teenagers like me serve our friends' parents. And there is a bond beyond anything we could imagine or create for ourselves. I know that the Holy Spirit is at work in that bread and that cup, drawing us closer to God and one another.

Or, one might have shared:

When I volunteer at our local soup kitchen, I sit down and talk with the people who come in for lunch. Sometimes they'll tell me stories about how their faith keeps them going, even in really difficult times. And, for a moment, I don't know if I'm the one serving or the one being served. You should come and see for yourselves; it really is an amazing place.

You may think that sounds a bit far-fetched for three teenaged boys, but I will testify that I've heard some pretty profound comments from our own youth.

Can you imagine what doors of hearts and souls might open if the church's witness and work in this world always welcomed the stranger to experience the abundant life Christ offers? ... If we could sincerely, confidently offer the invitation: "Come and see"?

Because, here's the thing: Our communities are full of those who are seeking comfort or guidance or peace; those who are seeking connection or care; those who are seeking the abiding presence of Christ. *Ours* could be the very invitation these seeking souls long to hear.

I remember the night I moved into the apartment I would call "home" during my year as a Young Adult Volunteer in southern India. My site coordinator had arranged for me to live in a retirement community, alongside neighbors who had made this community home because their own children and grandchildren were scattered across the globe. Over the coming months, the residents of Chacko Homes would become like honorary grandparents for me and that barren apartment, my home-away-from-home. But — *that* night — this retirement community in southern India felt like the loneliest place on the planet.

That first night, I spent minutes that felt like hours surveying my packed suitcase and empty shelves and thinking, "What am I doing here?" I was all alone, in a very foreign land, with eleven months to go. I had just plopped down on the bare mattress and succumbed to tears, when there was a knock on the door.

Standing outside my room were John and Rachel, two residents of that retirement community whom I had met at church the previous Sunday. “We have come to fetch you for choir rehearsal,” they said. Stumbling through hymns in a language I did not speak was not the way I’d planned to spend my evening, but the summons to choir rehearsal was exactly the invitation my seeking soul needed to hear. I dried my tears, grabbed my bag, and followed John and Rachel down the hallway.

These were not the words they used, but John and Rachel might as well have said “Come and see.” Come and see; there is grace to be found here. Come and see; here, in this place, you can experience abundant life.

I like to think we have all encountered the One who comes that we might have life, and have it abundantly. While John the Baptizer has not stood beside us to name the One who has just entered our lives, our hearts have known the truth of the encounter—perhaps in a moment when we found comfort from unrelenting grief, or felt the touch of a hand when we were lonely, or in the welcoming smile of a stranger when we stood at a new door. Maybe it was the hug of forgiveness when we thought all was lost, and we find ourselves at home once more. In so many ways, we have experienced grace upon grace. So let us not be shy or selfish about the good news in which we abide. May we, too, go out and invite others to experience God’s grace for themselves: “Come and see, come and see.”

Prayers of the People – Gregory Knox Jones

God of the past, present, and future, we come before you with an open spirit, pondering what it means to follow Jesus in our day. We acknowledge that we are not as quick to respond to his way as his first disciples did when Jesus said, “Come and see.” We wonder what holds us back from the life you urge us to live.

Could it be that the clatter of our culture drowns out your whispers in our minds? Or perhaps the problem is our calendar – so overflowing that we fail to even consider the path you commend to us. Or could it be that we are so committed to our *own* agendas that we refuse to consider a new script that embarks on the path of Jesus?

Gracious God, deepen our desire to pursue the adventures you have in mind for us. If we are anxious that we are not up to your challenge, fill us with courage. If we believe we will prove inadequate, infuse us with confidence. If we lack the resolve, fill us with determination. If we fear that we will surrender to despair when faced with setbacks, inspire us with hope. If we are hesitant to step beyond our routine and attempt something new, remind us of the joy that comes from meeting new people and experiencing new ventures.

Everlasting God, we pray that in following Christ, you will fill us with your passion for justice and your compassion for others, so that we may respond to the needs we encounter with a Christ-like spirit. Empower us to share the weight of someone who is suffering. Embolden us to resist prejudice and words that demean. Prod us to be generous in supporting the work of your church. Motivate us to preserve your creation for those who come after us.

Mighty God, we know that following Jesus includes praying for those who suffer, and so we pray for people who are facing immense hardship and misery. We pray for the people of Australia where deadly wildfires have killed at least 28 people, destroyed more than 3,000 homes, and may have killed as many as a billion animals. We pray that rains may extinguish the flames, cleanse the air, and overcome the drought. We pray for the people of Puerto Rico where two earthquakes have destroyed countless buildings and homes, and where many have been forced to sleep in the streets. We pray that aid and experts will help to quickly rebuild the devastated island.

We pray for families that have been harmed by the opioid crisis, for teenagers who are bullied, and for people with mental illness. We pray for victims of crime, of racism, and of sexual abuse. Grant them strength and support, perseverance and hope. Help us to discover ways to alleviate their affliction and the willingness to act.

Loving God, when we faithfully follow the way of Jesus we take part in transforming the world. Break down our resistance and build up our desire to go where you want us to go and to do what you want us to do during our brief life spans. We are on this earth a short while, help us to know that when we live as you call us to live, the world is enriched and we truly come alive. O God, the prayer Jesus taught us, shows us the way, may we embrace each word as we pray together, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.