

## Sermon: January 21, 2024 - John 1: 35-46

### Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

In March of 2018, Shannon and I had the great privilege of participating in a pilgrimage in Palestine and Israel. Two of the places that had the greatest impact, were the viscous, silt-laden waters of the Jordan River, where we renewed our baptismal vows, and the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, a place where, more than anyplace else, I was moved by the sense that *I was walking where Jesus had walked*. This morning's reading from the gospel of John takes us to both those places, as John shares his version of the calling of Jesus' first disciples.

I typically picture the calling of the disciples more in the way that Matthew, Mark and Luke portray it, with Jesus meandering along the Galilean shoreline and spotting people that would bring something special to the team. But John has a different story to tell, and in his version three things stand out:

- i) John the Baptist and his disciples... and their relationship to the mission of Jesus;
- ii) The importance of invitation, not just by Jesus, but by his followers;
- iii) The repeated refrain, to come and see, to experience first-hand.

#### I. John the Baptist and his disciples...and their relationship to the mission of Jesus

The first chapter of John – our reading last Sunday as well as today - intermingles the description of Christ Jesus as the Word made flesh, and *John the Baptist*, working at the Jordan River to announce, prepare and point to that same Word made flesh. John writes, "The Word was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Everything came into being through the Word, and ...what came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people.

<sup>6</sup> *A man named John was sent from God. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. <sup>8</sup> He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light....*

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup> *John testified about him, crying out, 'This is the one of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is greater than me because he existed before me.'"*

A few verses later, we read "<sup>29</sup> *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup> This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me'"* and a day later two of John's disciples leave him to start following Jesus. The gospel writer here couldn't be clearer, Jesus was the Word made Flesh, and John's task was to prepare people to follow Jesus through a repentance and ritual baptismal renewal. John's work was important, but it was only set in motion because there was a Jesus he could point to.

The fact that the gospel of John presents John the Baptist's work as so clearly subordinate to the work of Jesus makes me wonder why anyone would sign on to be a disciple of the Baptizer rather than a disciple of Jesus, once there was a choice to be made. And John the Baptist comes off as such a lone wolf, his lifestyle so off-the-hook, I find it a bit mind-blowing to picture him gathering disciples. What I found interesting to learn is that not only did John retain many of his disciples even after Jesus arrived; there are to this day religious folk with specific allegiance to John the Baptist. They're known as the Mandaeans, a persecuted religious group in Iraq with a diaspora that reaches to Australia, Sweden and the USA. The gospel of John emphasizes the light and life of Jesus and portrays the Baptist in a more muted light but clearly, John's blunt word of confrontation, repentance and ritual cleansing has its own enduring place.

Later in this gospel, in John 14:6, Jesus says <sup>6</sup> "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." I do not hear this as Jesus' way of saying, "only

Christians know the way to God” but rather, I interpret this as the gospel of John’s specific critique of those who would lift up someone other than Jesus. Many scholars over the ages surmise that the writer of the gospel of John was the unnamed disciple who, with Andrew, left John the Baptist to follow Jesus, so it makes sense that he might have taken it on himself to try to convince his old companions to let go of their veneration of John the Baptist, remember what the Baptizer himself said, and follow Jesus instead. I don’t see that as a critique of the modern day Mandaeans, but I do see it as a call for modern day Christians to put some oomph into their discipleship, and actually engage the core message of transformative love put forth by Jesus.

## **II. The importance of invitation, not just by Jesus, but by his followers.**

I love how the gospel of John frames the calling of the disciples. The first two disciples are sent by John the Baptist to Jesus, and then one of them, Andrew, goes and gets his brother, Simon Peter... so now there are three disciples. Jesus then heads to Galilee and calls Phillip, and Phillip heads off and snags Nathanael. At this point we have five disciples: two referred by John the Baptist, two recruited by existing disciples, and only one called directly by Jesus. What a wonderful masterplan for evangelism! John the Baptist recognized something in Jesus that would be of life-changing benefit to Andrew and the unnamed disciple, and sent them his way. Andrew and Phillip, almost immediately upon deciding to follow Jesus, knew two people that just had to come along with them. The task of identifying what Jesus has to offer, and inviting others to join the circle, was done mostly by people other than Jesus.

That is such a key message for us to hear afresh in the year 2024. As Church, we are those who have gathered in the name of Jesus Christ to seek depth of purpose in life, and we have come from a variety of backgrounds, with a variety of reasons, and having lived a multiplicity of life stories. Some of us were born into the faith and have lived it, perhaps continuously within the United Church of Canada, from childhood, but others came because of a life transition where someone suggested that walking alongside Jesus might be helpful – sort of like a referral from John the Baptist. And for decades we have heard that the single most important and effective factor in a Church continuing to welcome new folks, is plain old invitation: “won’t you come with me some Sunday” or “we’re helping to pack food hampers at Mini Thni, could you come along” or “I’m working at the Thrift Shop on Monday, would you like to come with me?” If we believe that in some way what we do here is done as disciples of Jesus – and I sure hope that’s a significant part of our self-identification! – then we are the ones who spread the good news. It also means that in the many choices of what we do and say as Church, where we spend our time and energy, where we give our hearts, we do so in a response to some sense of calling. We are here at the bidding of the Holy Spirit, who moves in us and through us in ways that can be of great benefit to us and to the community around us as we align our thoughts and our words and our actions with the words and the ways and the inclusivity and the profound hope we experience in Jesus Christ. We, as disciples, go deep with Jesus and keep learning and growing and changing with Jesus, and as we do so we’re called to spread that good news.

## **III. The repeated refrain, to come and see, to experience Jesus first-hand.**

The phrase, “come and see” – rendered by some Bible translations as “see for yourself” - shows up four times in the gospel of John. A blogger simply named “YoSteve” puts it really well: In John 1:39, Jesus invites two men to “come and see” where he was staying. This was an invitation to fellowship and to relationship. At least one of these men (Andrew), left this encounter really excited about Jesus. In John 1:46, Philip tries to talk to his friend Nathanael about Jesus and begins to get some push-back.... He resists the urge to argue or moralize or preach. Instead, he invites Nathanael to ‘come and see.’ In John 4:29, a Samaritan woman runs back to her town, fresh off of an encounter with Jesus. With breathless gasps, she tells everyone she can about her conversation with Jesus. ‘A man who told me everything I ever did’ she exclaimed. ‘Come and see’ makes sense here, so she invites. And lastly, in John 11:34, Jesus has just lost a friend.

Lazarus dies and his family mourns him. Jesus shows up during the funeral and meets with the family. He asks where the body is and they reply 'Come and see.' Jesus weeps. And then raises Lazarus from the grave."

Getting past the visual metaphor here which can be pretty problematic, tying belief to the sense of sight, this invitation is to come close, to personally experience what Jesus brings first-hand, and, having done so, to trust one's own experience. As the one who has, for the past 11.5 years had the profound privilege of standing at this pulpit, I hope and pray that my words about faith and life have functioned as that kind of invitation to go deep in your experience, your knowledge, your wisdom; to make your investigations into the path that Christ is calling you to be on. Admittedly, the gospel of John can be pretty inaccessible as he weaves deep, theological themes into the life story of Jesus but here, the gospel writer gives a gift to all Christians by calling us to have and trust our own experience of Christ, rather than placing all authority in the hands of the experts or the ordained.

Michael Card, one of my favourite Christian singer-songwriters, has recorded a series of songs about the gospel of John. His song about John 1:39 is called "Come and See" and the lyrics start like this: "Come and see, come follow me back to the place where He's staying. He will not mind, for there you will find all that your faith has been waiting. Come and see. Come and see, come follow me to a road where believing is seeing. There's work to do and words of truth to find in your heart for the speaking. Come and see. Come see the Way, the Truth and the Life, come see the light that is living. Come now and see how the Truth sets you free, come and live the life he is giving. Come and see."

And so, we have been on the banks of the Jordan, as two of John's disciples were sent to Jesus, and as one of them scurried off to get his sibling. We have been to the shores of that wonderful little Lake known as the Sea of Galilee, as Jesus directly calls one disciple and that person goes and brings a friend. We have been invited to experience for ourselves, all that Jesus brings to the world in the name of light and love and hope and peace. As we go through life, as the circumstances of our lives change, that which we feel called to do is sure to change. But what doesn't change, is the invitation of Christ to live a life shaped by love of God and love of neighbour, and the encouragement to draw others to that path as well. Such is the path of life, life in abundance, and for that path we give our humble thanks. Amen.

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