

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Call

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*Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
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Text: John 1:29-42

Who is this man Jesus? One of my seminary teachers talked about an experience with that question. She was visiting Hong Kong, and she was running late for a seminar on one of the islands, so her friends dropped her off at the docks to take a water taxi. As the land receded behind the small boat and the sun went down, all of the sights and sounds of the city faded, except for the lights shining across the harbor and the waves lapping at the side of the boat. She was left alone with the Chinese pilot, an older man. When it got quiet, he suddenly turned to her and said, "You are a Christian, aren't you? Tell me, who is this man Jesus?" What a question!

It's a question you can expect to hear a lot more from now on. Maybe you can remember a time when there were strict blue laws, when you couldn't go to the movie theater or even play in the park on Sunday. Maybe you can remember saying the Lord's Prayer in your public school. Some of us grew up in a world where it seemed like everyone was Christian, and all the rules were designed to reinforce a particular way of being Christian. That's how it was for hundreds of years in Europe and North America — and I'm not sure it was such a good thing. But it's different now. We live in an area that is a crossroads for people from all over the world, who come from many different traditions. Even people who might identify as Christians may not know the depths of the story of our faith. Just this week my son told me that not one other kid in his kindergarten class goes to church regularly. And so we're starting to hear this question again, from friends, neighbors, sometimes even children and grandchildren: "Who is this man Jesus? What does it mean to follow him?"

I'll bet there's someone in your life you can imagine asking you this question. Can you picture it and hear it in your mind? How do you answer? It's an uncomfortable question — especially if you never really had to wrestle with it growing up. Maybe you want to ask some questions yourself.

The gospel lesson we heard today is a story for people asking the question: "Who is Jesus, and what does it mean to follow him?" It gives a funny kind of answer — an answer that's not really an answer but an invitation. "Who is Jesus?" we ask. And his answer is: "Come and see."

John the Baptist knew who he was. When John saw Jesus walking toward him, he announced, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John saw Jesus as the passover lamb, the sacrifice that causes death to pass over God's people. But John didn't figure this out on his own. He heard a voice and had a vision that revealed this to him. For two days in a row, John continues to tell his disciples that this Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Son of God, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. But John's disciples don't immediately fall down on their faces and worship Jesus. Words just aren't enough to convey who this man Jesus is.

We like words. We Presbyterians are a wordy people. We have a rich worship tradition that focuses on the Word, with readings from the scripture and a sermon at

the center. We do our best to take our prayers and our liturgy from the words of scripture. And that works for me, because I like words. I like reading and writing and thinking—and maybe you do too. But sometimes we forget that God speaks to us not with words, but with *the* Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, a person. Through God's love and grace, God gives our human words wings to carry us up to hear the one, pre-existent *Word* that God spoke at the beginning and continues to speak, the Word that lived and breathed and wept and died with us, the Word that rose for us, the Word that prays for us. But without this grace, without the Spirit to bring us into the presence of Jesus, and to open us to hear and understand and believe, words aren't enough.

And so your neighbors and your friends and your children and grandchildren will never be argued or convinced into faith, not with words. John believed that Jesus was the Lamb of God because God had touched him, moved him, opened his eyes. But you can't communicate that with words. You can only tell your own story, as John did, and pray for God to touch the people around you. And invite them to come and see what you see.

Something touched Andrew and his friend. On the second day they got up and followed Jesus. Now Jesus is no dummy—he knows he's being tailed. Jesus turns around, looks at them, and he says, "What are you looking for?"

The first word out of their mouths is: "Rabbi, teacher." I think that's their answer to Jesus' question. They're looking for a teacher, for someone with wise and convincing words that they can carry away with them. But words can't carry who Jesus is or what he has to give. And so when these disciples ask Jesus a question, "Where are you staying?" I think it's on purpose that he doesn't give them a straightforward answer. "Come and see," Jesus says.

"Come and see." He could have given them words. He could have said, "I'm staying at Jacob and Miriam's place across the way." You'd think that even if words aren't enough to carry who Jesus is, that they'd be enough to carry some simple information, like where he's staying. But I think he knows something about us: he knows that once we start leaning on words it's hard to stop. If he starts his relationship as a teacher who can answer every question with words, then what happens when his disciples need to know about the things that really matter, that can't be described but have to be given? What happens when a wordy teacher can't find the words? His disappointed, word-hungry students will fall away. So at the beginning of their life together, Jesus doesn't offer them words. He offers them an invitation to enter into his space: "Come and see. Come and see where I'm staying."

And that's how they discover who he is. The story doesn't tell us what went on when Andrew and his friend went and stayed with Jesus, but it does say that Andrew ran out and found his brother Simon and told him, "We have found the Messiah." So what happened in this gap in the story? The gospel doesn't give us any words to describe what Andrew experienced in the presence of Jesus. But maybe that's because the story wants us to offer us, not words, but an invitation from Jesus to "come and see" for ourselves.

How do we "come and see" who Jesus is? Andrew came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah because he went and stayed with him. Where does Jesus live... today?

On this weekend we remember the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., and everything that he did to make this country a place where all its people would be treated equally before the law. But as Christians, we should also see his work as a form witness that goes beyond words. See, Dr. King knew that Jesus Christ identified himself with the oppressed and the poor. In his mountaintop speech, King said: "Somehow the preacher must say with Jesus, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath

anointed me, and he's anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor."¹ And so Jesus is present as Messiah and Lord wherever the poor are honored and served. Jesus invites us to "come and see" who he is by serving him, by joining in the efforts of the Center for Food Action to feed those who lack food, by spending time and listening the stories of the guests at the Family Promise Shelter. Come and see.

But Jesus has also given us one another. He invites us to "come and see" who he is by deepening our relationships, by letting others glimpse our broken places, by letting them offer us grace and forgiveness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that too often the church becomes a place where people think they have to be good, pious, and perfect. If that were true, then we'd have no more than words to offer the world, because I know and you know deep down that we are all flawed, broken, and vulnerable people. But the truth is that in Jesus God embraces us exactly as we are, even as God calls us to be so much more. The good news, Bonhoeffer reminds us, is that God "wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your [sisters and] brothers, as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner. Thank God for that; [God] loves the sinner but [...] hates the sin."² Jesus invites us to come and see the truth of this good news by sharing our stories with each other and offering forgiveness and welcome in his name.

I know I've been touched and moved, and my faith has been deepened by the stories that some of you have shared through the years. In recent times, I've come to value the things people share at our Bible Study and Strength and Spirit, as they look to this community for support and prayer—but you also see it here, when we share joys and concerns. I invite you to come and see where Jesus is staying with us, here, as we deepen our relationships and learn to speak the words of forgiveness God gives us to share with each other.

So don't be satisfied with just words. Come and see who this man Jesus is. Come and find him announcing good news to the poor. Come and stay with him in a community gathered to announce forgiveness in his name. Come and discover that he is Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi, and Messiah. Come and see. Amen.

1 Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop." Speech given April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. Quoted from <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. New York: Harper and Row, 1954. p. 111.