

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

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John 1: 29-42

During this little season right after Christmas and Epiphany but before Lent, we read gospel stories early in Jesus's ministry that I suppose you could call "little epiphanies." Last Sunday we heard Matthew's story of Jesus's baptism, which was not such a small epiphany, really. The story-line of the season after the Epiphany is to follow Jesus's baptism with his calling of disciples. You know, like, walking along the shore of the lake and the fishermen who leave their boats and livelihoods to become loyal disciples of this guy they just met.

This week, instead of continuing the story with Matthew's gospel, we shift back to John's gospel. To clarify, the John who wrote this gospel is not John the Baptist, but the other John, one of Jesus's disciples. John the Baptist plays a major role in the first chapter of the other John's gospel.

The passage we just read takes place soon after Jesus is baptized and we notice that it's drenched in the language of looking, seeing, and finding. "I **saw** the Spirit descending on him like a dove," the Baptist says about a newly baptized Jesus. And again: "I myself have **seen** and have testified."

"**Look**, here is the Lamb of God!" he tells his disciples the next day. Jesus "turns and **sees**" those same disciples and invites them to "**come and see**" where he's staying. Later, Andrew tells his brother Simon that he has "**found**"

the Messiah. The passage ends with Jesus **looking** at Simon before renaming him.

Looking. Seeing. Finding. Our lesson this morning revolves around these actions. The Gospel opens as John the Baptizer **sees**, testifies, and humbly allows his disciples to leave so that they can follow Jesus. Jesus then invites those same disciples to keep looking (“**come and see**”). But first he asks them a piercing question about seeing, a question we would do well to ask ourselves: “*What are you **looking** for?*”

It’s the first recorded question Jesus asks his disciples, and it’s a question for the ages. *What are you looking for?* In your heart, in your private and personal places, what are the hungers that drive you forward in your life of faith? Why do you persist in your practice of Christianity? As we say goodbye to an old year and welcome a new one, what are we hoping for, asking for, looking for, in our spiritual lives? Do we know?

When you go to church, when you pray, when you open the pages of the Bible, what are you looking for? Are you looking for anything in particular, or are you just going through the motions of a religious life you inherited from your parents? Are you seeking consolation? Affirmation? Belonging? Certainty? Do you look to gain power, or to surrender it? Do we want to know, or can we consent to trust? Are we looking to arrive, or to journey?

It's no great surprise that the disciples who first hear the question simply dodge it. Perhaps, like us, they don't quite know what to say. Whatever the case, instead of attempting a direct response, they ask Jesus their own question: "Where are you staying?" Which could be taken to mean: where exactly are you headed, Rabbi? Where and how and with whom are you aligned? What's our final destination as your potential followers? What will home look like if we stay with you? Tell us up front what we need to know so that we can pin you down, locate you, understand you.

And Jesus's response? A maddening one, concrete and elusive at the same time. "**Come and see.**" Which is to say: we have to follow Jesus all the way home if we want to know where he is and what he's about. He won't be pinned down. He won't fit into any box we try to stick him in. He's not someone who remains static—he *moves*. There will be times when he will not be easy to seek or find. The path that leads to him will become clear only when we decide to walk it. So the question we must ask ourselves at every turn: what are we looking for? For Jesus? Or something else?

Looking. Seeing. Finding. These are the repeated tasks of Epiphany. The heart of discipleship – not to hasten the end of our search, but to pursue it ever more deeply and intentionally. To cultivate a willingness to look. A willingness to see and be seen. A willingness to tell the truth about what we have found. A willingness to venture forth again, even when we don't know where "home" is.

The invitation to “come and see” is an invitation to leave our comfortable vantage points, and dare to believe that maybe, just maybe, we have been limited and wrong in our certainties about each other, about God, and about the world. To “come and see” is to approach all of life with a grace-filled curiosity, to believe that we are holy mysteries to each other, worthy of further exploration. To come and see is to enter into the joy of being deeply seen and deeply known; to have the very best that lies hidden within us called out and called forth.

Of course, our seeing is always selective. We have choices in what we look for, what we prioritize, what we name, and especially in what we name in each other. The selves we present to the world are complicated and messy, and it takes both love and patience to sift through those layers and find what lies at the core. But there is great power in that sifting, too. Something healing and holy happens to us when we are deeply seen, known, named, and accepted.

Today’s Gospel story is not just about our seeing; at its core it is about what Jesus sees. It’s a story about Jesus’s way of looking, and about what becomes possible when we dare to experience his gaze. Jesus looks at John’s disciples, and calls forth their hunger, their curiosity, their hope, and their trust. He looks at Simon and sees Peter, the Rock. He looks at us and sees what lies beneath our confusion, our fear, our mixed motives, and our doubts.

To be really and truly seen requires more than a quick glance. It requires a second look, maybe a third or fourth, and that deeper, kinder, and more

penetrating look—is grace. It is the gracious vision of Jesus, and it is the vision we are called to practice in a world that too often judges and condemns at first glance. Is there anything, after all, that feels lonelier than the experience of being unseen, misunderstood, and prematurely dismissed? And is there anything more life-giving than the experience of being seen for who we really are, deep down beneath the fragile defenses we put up out of fear?

What are you looking for? What are you looking for when you encounter the people around you? Is your seeing fear-filled and narrow? Or is it spacious and courageous? Are you looking to judge or looking to bless?

Only when we ourselves have *been seen* in the profound and life-giving way that Jesus sees us will we find ourselves able to see others as beloved of God. When we realize that we are loved right down to the core of our being, we find the capacity to embrace other people as Jesus embraced every disciple, every sinner, every doubter, and every believer who crossed his path. May we look as he looks and see as he sees. May we find what and who he wants us to find. And may we ever seek the One who always and everywhere seeks us.