

Isaiah 49: 1-7; John 1: 29-42

“Come and See”

Last week I mentioned how the life of the church moves from one liturgical season to the next, with some precision, like when we unpack the Christmas closet at the start of the Advent season and pack it back again on Epiphany until the next year. I mentioned Epiphany as the event that brought the Christmas season to a close, with the wise men from the East who followed the Star finally finding the Christ Child.

But Epiphany is also a beginning. Epiphany means the manifestation of Christ to the world, and the wise men from a faraway country were among the first witnesses. What they witnessed was the beginning of a new world order; the world that shifted forever when the Word of God, the Love and Wisdom of God appeared among us in flesh and blood. The world we now live in.

And last week, the first Sunday after Epiphany, we listened to the story of Jesus’s Baptism in Matthew’s Gospel, which was also an “epiphany” story, manifesting the Christ to the world, with a voice from heaven declaring “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And Jesus’s Baptism marked the beginning of Jesus’s ministry. So, the liturgical seasons don’t tell disjointed, separate stories; rather, they flow from one to the next to tell the full story of Jesus’s life, and in his life is the meaning of our own unfolding lives.

But before we start following Jesus through the Gospel of Matthew, today we listen to John’s Gospel to learn who this Jesus is, who invites us to “Come and See” where he’s going. In fact, the two disciples responded to Jesus’s invitation to “Come and See,” precisely because John the Baptist, their boss, had told them, two days in a row, that Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

What could he have meant by “the Lamb of God”? A lamb is a rich symbolic image that’s used in different ways throughout the Scriptures, not always meek and weak; sometimes powerful and victorious. But the only place where the lamb image is used in connection with “taking away the sin of the world,” is one about God’s Suffering Servant in the book of Isaiah. And by the word “sin,” what is meant is not only our immoral behavior; sin is anything and everything that deviate from the wholeness and the goodness of God’s creation, including us. Our brokenness, our despair, our wounds, God wants to heal and so send the Servant.

In Matthew's story of Jesus's Baptism, when the voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," Matthew was remembering God's voice that once spoke through the prophet Isaiah, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." Those words are from the first of the four Servant Songs in Isaiah. In the first Servant Song, the servant is patient, nonviolent and merciful in carrying out his ministry of bringing justice. He or she is an ideal leader to draw all nations to God's justice, that is not achieved by military might or force, but through humility and endurance.

The Second Servant Song is the Isaiah passage Yvonne read for us this morning. As in the first song, God calls the servant to be a light to the nations, so that God's salvation may reach not just the people of Israel but to the end of the earth. And the Servant now speaks to the Coastlands, to "You peoples from far away!" His voice addresses even us, beyond time and space, who do not have the history with God that Israel has.

This servant quotes God as saying, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But the same servant also laments that his work has been in vain, accomplishing little. The Salvation God intends to bring to the whole world through the servant is an order of compassionate justice that God has created and upon which the wholeness of the universe depends, but it is nowhere to be seen. He realizes he cannot put his confidence in the apparent accomplishment of his work, or lack thereof, but in the fact that it is God who created him to be his servant, and God will accomplish this.

In the third Servant Song, too, the servant is humiliated by those whom he is trying to bring God's salvation, and he finds comfort and strength only with God. The Suffering Servant in which the image of Lamb appears is the fourth and the last Servant Song. He bears the sin of the world, which is to say all that is in us and in the world that resist and reject God loving intention for us to live a rich and abundant life.

In the Jewish tradition understands the Suffering Servant to be Israel. And the original writer of the Songs may have had a specific historical figure in mind, but the Gospel writers clearly recognized Jesus as God's faithful servant who was obedient till the very end.

And this Servant is called to be the Light to the nation, the light that attracts and draws all people out of the darkness. The Light knows the darkness very well but is not overcome by it. That's how the Gospel of John begins: What has come into being in him was life, and the life

was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

John the Baptist pointed his own disciples to this Light, to the Lamb of God that take away the sin of the world, and he told them that Jesus was the Son of God. Drawn to this light, they followed. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he asked them, “what are you looking for?” It is also the question the Gospel writer asks of us: what are we looking for in Jesus?

The disciples did not have an answer yet, even though their boss, John the Baptist had told them Jesus was the Son of God and the Lamb of God. Instead, they ask Jesus a question calling him Rabbi, Teacher. Teacher, where are you staying? What a strange question! What do they care where Jesus was staying? But Jesus invites them to “Come and See,” and they came and saw where Jesus was staying, and they remained with him that day. We are not told WHERE Jesus was staying, but that the disciples “stayed” with him.

The Greek word here for “staying” and “remaining” is the same Greek word for “abide”, the word Jesus uses later in the Gospel of John, when he is about to leave the disciples and this world. There, Jesus says to them, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide/stay/remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”

Jesus’s invitation to “come and see” where he is staying, is Jesus’s invitation to us to abide in him and become one with him, as Jesus is one with God. Jesus’s invitation to “come and see” where he is staying is his invitation for us to become the Servant, too, as Jesus was.

Israel is the Servant, Jesus is the Servant, and so we, too, are called to be the Servant, individually and as a church who is the Christ’s body. Many have answered this invitation to “come and see.” Maybe you know someone in your life whom you recognize as a faithful and obedient servant who has been the light to you. Perhaps, you remember the moment in your life when you knew you were the Servant, being recognized by no one.

Tomorrow, we celebrate the birthday and the life of a true Suffering Servant who labored in our beloved and broken nation. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Just like the Servant in the Servant Song, Dr. King did not see the fulfillment of the just world for which he labored, and hence he spoke of the ark of the moral universe being long, yet trusting in the promise of God who created him to be the servant, he trusted it bent towards justice.

The stage each of us are given may not be so grand and public as Dr. King's, but Jesus will lead us where we are needed, if we only "came and see" where he is staying.

In honor of the Suffering Servant of our own time and in our own nation, I'll conclude with the invitation from Dr. King.

"Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important - wonderful. If you want to be recognized - wonderful. If you want to be great - wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's your new definition of greatness. And this morning, the thing that I like about it...by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermo-dynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant."

~ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.