

Sunday, January 15, 2023
Second Sunday after the Epiphany

John 1.29-42

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/853205385734189>

(Sermon begins at about 22:55)

“Where Are You Staying?”

Last Sunday, we celebrated the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, with the Gospel reading being Matthew’s version of the account of Jesus’ baptism by John in the River Jordan. While all four of the Gospels say something about Jesus’ baptism, only the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) actually give a relatively complete account of what happened that day, as would be reported by a witness observing the baptism event. On the other hand, the Gospel according to John—the reading of which we heard moments ago—takes a different approach. Not the report of a witness, but rather the reflection of the one who actually performed the baptism: John the Baptist.

While it is unclear who he is specifically talking to, upon seeing Jesus walk by, John first refers to Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Indicating his understanding of who Jesus is. An understanding that is a direct result of his experience of baptizing Jesus. He continues, not by recounting the details of the baptism itself, but by reflecting on how his understanding of who Jesus is developed and was confirmed as a result of what happened during Jesus’ baptism. Reflecting on what most stuck out for him about the baptism event: “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” And how God, the One who sent him to baptize with water spoke to John and provided confirmation that “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” Confirmation that the One he was being baptized could only be the Son of God.

The story continues the next day, when John is with a couple of his disciples—at this point, Jesus had not yet begun to call his own disciples—and John again comments, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples are like, “okay, we’re outta here. If you’re not the Messiah and you say this other guy is, we’re following him.” You have to admit, they do appear to be following their higher calling. Even though they have been disciples of John the Baptist, it is obvious that they are in search of the real deal, the Messiah. If John is clearly not it, they need to move on, no matter how fond they may be of John and his message. And to his credit, John has been very clear that he is not the Messiah. In fact, he essentially pushes the two who had been following him to leave and go follow Jesus—the one whom he believes to be the Messiah, the Lamb of God. He’s done his job of pointing the way. It is now up to the disciples to take it from here.

As we are told, the two disciples do immediately leave John and literally start following Jesus. Jesus asks his first would-be disciples, “What are you looking for?” They give what, on the surface, seems to be an odd response: “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Not “we’re looking for a

deeper relationship with God.” Not “we’re looking for the Messiah.” Not “we want to get to know you better.” Not “we want to hear what you have to teach us.” But rather, “where are you staying?” Where are you staying??? What does Jesus’ home, his dwelling place, have to do with anything, let alone their quest for deeper spiritual enlightenment or fulfillment?

While there is no specific explanation provided, it certainly seems that the would-be disciples have a deeper meaning in mind for their cryptic question. The original term for “staying” as recorded in John’s Gospel certainly has as its primary meaning a sense of staying or dwelling or abiding, indicating location. However, other passages in the New Testament that use this same word indicate a broader sense than just location. Where used elsewhere in Scripture, this term can also indicate a sense of being settled, of existing, of enduring, of being steadfast, of being in close union. The same word that Jesus himself uses in other parts of John’s Gospel to talk about him being in relationship with the Father (e.g., Jn 14.10). The same word that Jesus himself uses to describe his followers abiding in him as he abides in the Father (e.g., Jn 5.38, 6.56). A quality or state of being beyond mere location.

Based on this etymological exercise, informed by our own theological understanding of who Jesus is—an understanding the would-be disciples are not yet completely aware of, and yet are seeking to discern—it is pretty certain that they are not concerned with Jesus’ physical dwelling place. Rather, they are seeking a deeper understanding of who Jesus truly is. Seeking to understand the foundation on which his life and ministry are built. His guiding principles. His understanding of and relationship with God. Sure, John said Jesus was “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And John talked about Jesus’ relationship with the Holy Spirit. And John even “testified that this is the Son of God.” And while they certainly trust and respect John and his pronouncements—enough to leave him when he said he is not the one they are looking for—they still are in discernment mode. They still need to experience for themselves who this Jesus is. Is he all that John says he is?

Jesus understands what these would-be disciples are asking. That they are seeking a deeper understanding of who he is, so that they can decide for themselves whether they are going to commit to following him. That they are doing their due diligence. Rather than give some theological explanation of who he is; or recite his mission statement, his philosophy of ministry; or listing his qualifications and accomplishments, Jesus gives them what they really need. An invitation: “Come and see.” An invitation to spend time with him. An invitation to get to know him up-close and personal. An invitation to watch him in action. An invitation to truly experience him so that they can make an informed decision for themselves. And most importantly, an invitation to enter into relationship with him.

Now, we don’t know for sure what transpired after Jesus issued his invitation to “Come and see.” Though I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall at that get-together, to hear what Jesus and the would-be disciples talked about, to witness what else happened between them. All we know is that the two would-be disciples “came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.” They accepted Jesus’ invitation and had the opportunity to experience who Jesus really is. Whatever transpired that afternoon was apparently sufficient. It was enough to change their lives. Or, at least, Andrew’s life (we don’t know about the other would-be disciple). As the Gospel tells us, Andrew did become one of the twelve apostles. And

that Andrew was so impressed with what he experienced of Jesus that he went and told his brother Simon, “We have found the Messiah.” And Simon—who Jesus renames Peter—in turn became an apostle. In fact, he became the head of the apostles, Jesus’ chief lieutenant and leader of the Christian movement following Jesus’ death and resurrection.

While this is a nice little history lesson on how Jesus began his public ministry following his baptism and began calling his disciples, today’s Gospel account also provides us with a fundamental understanding of how we approach our relationship with Christ. That the foundation of our relationship with Jesus is not based on what someone else says about him. Oh, sure, what other people say about Jesus is important. It can be the introduction to, the entry point for, relationship with Jesus. Just as John the Baptist through his teachings and proclamations introduced his disciples to Jesus and who he is. But that is not enough for true relationship to develop and grow. For that, we need, as Jesus invited his would-be disciples, to “Come and see.” We need to have the opportunity to experience Jesus in our own lives. To experience how he operates in our own lives. To experience who he is for us. Because each of us has a unique relationship with him. My relationship with Jesus is not going to be the same as yours. Just as my relationship with any given person is not going to be the same as your relationship with that same person.

That was something I realized as I have reflected on my time in seminary. There was a part of me that thought that when I went to seminary, it would deepen my relationship with Jesus. That by learning more about Scripture, learning more about theology, that through more knowledge, I would know Jesus even more, even better. And while all that knowledge gained in seminary was valuable to my understanding of who Jesus is on an intellectual level, it did little for my personal relationship with Jesus. Because our relationship with Jesus is not based on a bunch of facts or intellectual machinations to explain the mystery of who he is as the Son of God. My true and authentic relationship with Jesus is based on how I have experienced him in my own life. How he has been with me in good times and bad—particularly the bad. How he has supported me in the ups and down of life—particularly the downs. How he has shown his love for me. How he has worked in my life to help shape the person and priest I am today.

Sure, none of that would have been possible if not for those people in my life—family, friends, teachers—who pointed the way to Jesus. Sharing something of who he is for them, inspiring me to seek him out, to seek to discover and discern who he is for me. Leading to the personal experiences I have had, forming the unique relationship I have with him. And in return, I can—and hopefully do—point the way to Jesus for others, inspiring them to seek a deeper relationship with him. A relationship that is uniquely theirs.

Our lives of faith are ones of continually seeking. Continually questioning. Continually discerning. Continually growing. All of which entails continually asking Jesus, “where are you staying?” Where are you staying in my life here and now, in this moment, in this place? Where are you staying in my life in this particular experience, be it good or not-so-good? Where are you staying in my life as I seek to grow deeper and more fully into who you are calling me to be? And Jesus, always seeking to deepen and strengthen his relationship with us, is always there, inviting us to “Come and see.”