

"Come and See" – John 1:29-42 – January 19, 2020

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

Last week was Baptism of the Lord Sunday, and we heard the story of Jesus' baptism from the perspective of Matthew. Today we jump to John's gospel, and his telling of the story of the baptism as seen through the eyes of John the Baptist. Prior to our reading, John the Baptist was questioned by some religious authorities who wanted to know why he was baptizing people. They wondered if he was the Messiah. John told them no, but said that was one coming after him who would be. The very next day, he saw Jesus walking toward him. John exclaimed, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. I came baptizing with water so that he could be revealed. This is the one I was talking about! I saw the Spirit of God descend on him like a dove. This is the one who I was told to watch for!"

Then the next day, John was standing with two of his disciples when he saw Jesus walking by. John exclaimed, "Look! Here he is, the Lamb of God!" When his two disciples heard this, they began to follow him. Implicit in this brief exchange was sort of a "changing of the guard" for John's disciples. They had been following him, learning from him, but now it was time to follow Jesus.

As they walked along, following at some distance, Jesus turned to them and asked, "What are you looking for?" They didn't come out and say, "We're looking for the Messiah," but that certainly was on their minds, based upon their former teacher's remarks about Jesus. They wanted to learn more about him. But the two people said to Jesus, "Rabbi, (or teacher) where are you staying?" And Jesus invited them, "Come and see."

And they did. They went with him, and they remained with him long enough to have their curiosity confirmed, so Andrew went to get his brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah." Simon came along with Andrew, and Jesus gave him a new name, Peter.

The exchange between the two disciples is important. It could have gone much differently. Jesus turns and says, "What are you looking for?" They responded, "Are you the Messiah?" And Jesus could have said, "Yes." End of story. But it's not that easy. Remember, the Jewish people of that time period had a certain expectation of what the Messiah should be, and how he would act. It was an image developed over many years of prophetic writing and various political and social hardships.

In their minds, the Messiah represented their savior, but in a military and powerful sense. They were stuck down at the bottom of a very large dog pile, and they had been for quite some time, and they were looking for the top dog who would come to rescue them and bring them back to the top of the heap. They had longed for a powerful rescuer who would establish his dominion and take over.

If the interchange between Jesus and the two disciples had been more direct, I think that would have led to immediate speculations about his identity and what that means. And Jesus knew

that. He didn't want them jumping to any conclusions. We humans don't get to define what Messiah means. Instead, we, like the disciples, are offered an invitation to Come and See. We cannot assume we know Jesus before we even listen to what he has to tell us.

Throughout the history of the Christian church, humans had tried to define themselves with the image of power and domination. And unfortunately, the church has abused its power over the centuries, so we get events like the Crusades and the Inquisition and the Salem Witch Trials, just to name a few that stand out.

We don't get to create Jesus in our own image. As Christians, we are to be created to conform to his image. I think we see too many people today trying to put words in Jesus' mouth that he simply did not say.

My sophomore year of high school, I took a class called English Literature. It was a class for juniors and seniors, and it was a more difficult literature class than some of the others that were offered. We studied English writers and started out by reading "Beowulf," which was written around the year 1000. If you've ever read it, you know how hard it is to not only read, but to understand. It's English, but no English I had ever encountered before.

I hated "Beowulf." And I began second-guessing my decision to take the class. I loved to read, but until then, reading and comprehension had always come easily. Now faced with something difficult to understand, I immediately disliked it, considering it a waste of time.

And as a high school sophomore, I of course, had the wisdom to make such a pronouncement. Having the ability to read does not always give one the ability to understand.

Why is *Beowulf* so difficult to understand? What about the works of other English writers – Chaucer, Dickens, Shakespeare? Because of the content and the context. Unfamiliar words, phrases, idioms, dialects, time periods, themes. It takes hard work to be able to understand, and it helps to have a very good and patient teacher.

I learned a very important lesson as a high school sophomore. That even though I loved to read, reading would not always be easy. Just because I could read the words on any given page did not mean I would be able to easily understand what those words meant. I needed to take into account its context and consult resources more knowledgeable than I.

Reading scripture is not easy. It is a translation of multiple texts written thousands of years ago in a different part of the world and in unfamiliar cultures. Understanding is not as simple as just reading the words on a page and taking them at face value. I think there are many people who say that they are Christians, but who mistakenly believe that they have an understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus would do without taking the time to really get to know him. People have a tendency to create him and his teachings in their own image rather than in his.

When we look at the story in the beginning of John's gospel, and we hear the words of John the Baptist calling Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – suppose you were some random person who knew nothing about Christianity. If you had no understanding of anything beyond the basic meanings those words, you would have no idea what they meant in this context or who Jesus is? So anyone who says that a line of scripture taken out of context and stated on its own has a very limited understanding of interpretation entails.

It's the same thing with how Jesus responded to those two disciples of John the Baptist. John told them that Jesus was greater than he – that they needed to move on from following John to him. So they started to follow. When Jesus stopped and turned to them, he asked, What are you looking for? They responded with a question, where are you staying? Implying they wanted a chance to talk with him and hang out with him for a while. And he responded, "Come on then, come and see." And Andrew saw enough that he ran to get his brother, "Come on, Simon, we've found him, we've found the Messiah."

And the first disciples had been called.

So the question of Jesus to each of us is the same – What are you looking for? Are you looking for a Messiah who conforms to the image that you were expecting? Or are you looking to get to know Jesus better and conform to the image he expects of you. That is a question we have to ask ourselves every day. What are we looking for?