

14 January 2024

Come and See

John 1:35-51

Over the next couple of weeks we are going to be looking at a key element of Jesus' early ministry: choosing and calling disciples. Today we read two calling stories from John chapter 1, verses 35-51.

³⁵ *The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'* ³⁷*The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?'* ³⁹*He said to them, 'Come and see.'* *They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).*

⁴³ *The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'* ⁴⁴*Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'* ⁴⁶*Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'* *Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'* ⁴⁷*When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'* ⁴⁸*Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?'* *Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'* ⁴⁹*Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'* ⁵⁰*Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.'* ⁵¹*And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'*

"Come and see" is an interesting non-answer, isn't it? First, when John's disciple Andrew asks Jesus "where are you staying?" Jesus doesn't do the simple thing and, you know, answer the simple question. Instead, he says "Come and see," inviting Andrew over, then spending the day with him. Next, when the excited Philip runs to tell his friend Nathanael about the man he's met from Nazareth – "I think he's the Messiah!" – Nathanael replies with skepticism, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" but Philip doesn't argue. He just says "Come and see." Now, of all the gospels, John is the most self-consciously literary, in the sense of using complex symbolism, repeated motifs, and so on, so we can be sure that this identical phrase in companion paragraphs is not an accident. Here John points out that when it comes to following Jesus, what matters is not explanation, or argument: it's experience. Don't take my word for it. Come and see.

This is not how we normally think about faith, or at least not how we've thought about faith for the past 500 years. For us, it's *all* about explanations and arguments. Faith is agreeing to a set of standard answers. This is especially true of Protestants. You see, the Protestant Reformation overlapped with another huge social movement: the Enlightenment. Human knowledge was growing by leaps and bounds, and Europeans got really impressed with human

reason. So when Protestantism appeared, it started out with theological debate, first Luther and Calvin arguing with Roman Catholics, then Luther and Calvin arguing with each other, and both of them arguing with Anabaptists and Separatists and others. Protestantism was founded on argument. It still shows: in most Protestant worship services, the focal point is not prayer or Communion but the sermon. It's our unspoken sacrament. As Scottish theologian John Bell puts it, "We took the Word made flesh and turned him back into words."

Put that way, it feels wrong, doesn't it? Being a Christian is surely more than being able to explain it or defend it, and worship must be more than the lecture portion. We had an interesting discussion in our Confirmation group last month. We're doing a unit on worship, and after defining worship as an encounter with a mysterious, awe-inspiring, and loving God, we talked about whether our regular worship services actually provide that experience. We listed all the different elements of a normal worship service, then individually rated them as to how important each was to the goal of worship. Then we compared notes and averaged our scores. The top element, the only one that everyone felt was absolutely essential to worship was . . . prayers of thanks and praise. Other high scores went to music, both sung and instrumental, prayers of intercession, and acts of community. Notice what's not in the top five? Me talking.

The confirmands are right: explanation and argument should not be the center of worship. Neurologists studying the brain now know that different parts of the brain perform different functions. Some parts are dedicated to automatic and instinctive responses. Other parts have to do with emotional responses. Still others are the center of complex and abstract reasoning: think algebra and art. Moreover, neurologists can read brain scans to see which part of the brain is activated for different activities. Want to guess which part of the brain fires up when a person is asked to make a decision? It's not the rational mind, but the emotional mind. The person leading the seminar I attended on this subject put it this way: "Every decision is an emotional decision. The part of the brain that deals with logic and complex reasoning only comes into play later, coming up with rationalizations for what you've already decided."

If this is true, it has broad implications. For instance, you cannot change someone's mind by arguing with them. If anything, you'll only make that person angry and more emotionally invested in what they already believed. Just stay out of the comment sections, all right? It also means that all those centuries of Protestant sermon-based worship and argument-based evangelism were never the best approach. Maybe in a world such as America in the 1950s, where everyone was socially expected to be part of a church, whether they believed anything or not, the doctrinal differences helped people to choose which church to go to, but we're not in that world anymore. The question the church has to answer today is not "Why this church instead of that one?" but rather, "Why a church at all? Why are we even here?" And explanations of what we believe are not an answer to that question. The only effective answer, I think, is Jesus' answer to Andrew: "Come and see."

You see, there is one thing that does change our minds. Let me illustrate with a story. When my daughter Grace was ten or eleven, a church family hired her to babysit their daughter. It was her first time ever to babysit. Sadly, this daughter was a terror, the sort of terror who can sense weakness and is drawn to it like a shark smelling blood. As a result, after an hour or two Grace was calling her mother in tears. Rebecca went over and rescued her, but for the next eight years or so, Grace was absolutely, 100%, convinced that she was terrible with kids. I know, right? Grace, the elementary school teacher? What happened? Well, in college, she took a summer job that involved leading children's camps and discovered not only that she's really

good with children, but that she enjoys it. She had been sure that she was hopeless with kids because of a horrible experience. What changed her mind? A different experience.

Jesus told us in the Great Commission to make disciples. But how do you do that? How did Jesus do it? Not with arguments, not with sermons. Jesus told Andrew, “Come, walk with me. I’ll show you. Come and see.” Jesus didn’t invite people to agree with him or to join his group. He invited them to a relationship. And Philip apparently sensed that. How did Philip get Nathanael to Jesus? Not with speeches, not with explanations. He said, “I couldn’t even describe it. You got to meet this guy yourself. Come and see.” You see the good news that we are charged with is very simple: Jesus loves you. But that’s a kind of good news that’s not that simple to express. Words aren’t enough. Persuasive arguments are not persuasive. Did anybody here persuade their spouse to marry them by submitting a résumé and a cost-benefit analysis? The only way to communicate love is to love. The only thing that will convince someone that they are loved is for them to experience it.

So that’s our job. Jesus is no longer here on earth in person (so far as I know) to show people what love is. So that’s on us now. We are to love people. Love our next-door neighbors, our co-workers, our in-laws, whoever. Love them patiently and persistently, and if they ever ask us why – “Why, after all the things I’ve done, do you still seem to care about me?” – then, then we have a chance to speak.

Here’s what to say: “Come and see.”

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Some of you already figured this out, but I sneaked in a sermon on evangelism today. This is what telling good news means: loving people. Please don’t memorize the Roman Road to Salvation, or the Four Spiritual Laws, or any other word-based argument for why people should become Christians. Please don’t slip tracts or church fliers under strangers’ windshield wipers. And please don’t try to defend the Bible in an internet comments section. Seriously, just love people, and when they ask about it, tell them, “Let me show you where I learned how to do that.”