

Come and See

The Rev. Renée Marie Rico
Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ
Sunday, January 17, 2021
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:35-42

Today's gospel scripture follows the story of Jesus's baptism, and the disciples initial glimpse of Jesus.

Our gospel writer John has already recognized Jesus as "the lamb of God," a metaphor that he will use for the whole of his gospel, including the crucifixion of Jesus at the moment that the pascal lamb is slaughtered in the Jerusalem temple on the high holy day of Passover. We today already know the end of the story.

Today's scene from the beginning of the gospel shows a shift in power, from John the Baptist, who is the loyal opposition leader to the corrupt temple powers in Jerusalem, to Jesus. Those have been following John will make a move, which begins more like switching instructors in college, but underneath there is much more at stake – for Jesus begins to ask the two disciples who see something special in this Jesus with a single question that resounds down to us today:

What are you looking for, what are you seeking?

In the context of this past year, what a question that is. After a year filled with a rising pandemic, racial tensions, and an election filled with acrimony, with extremists vowing to continue violence against government, with many of us staying distant from family to protect them, and/or staying close to home to help our health-care workers get through this, I can imagine that we are seeking a lot right now.

Some of us are feeling the effects of this long-term stress. I know that I've been coping with depression symptoms and more than a couple of folks have shared that they are too. Sleep may be harder to find, restlessness and anger are there.

In our story, the disciples perhaps don't know yet what they are seeking – but they know that they don't have it, whatever that "it" is. They know that the gnawing feeling of having too much anxiety, too much worry, is not what God intends for their lives. They know that to comply with the world's strictures and confinements of what the Roman empire insists of them is not God's Way.

When the disciples respond to Jesus' query with their own question, "Where are you staying?" they're asking Jesus this at two levels: for the location of his tent, or the address of the guest house at which he is visiting; and they want to know about the enduring, permanent, eternal, undying dwelling place of this Lamb of God, the one that they will start to recognize as the Messiah.

But this is the beginning, and they ask basic questions: Where are you staying? Where can we find you? Where shall we go to be with you, to receive what you have to offer? Where can we be in the very presence of God?

I had my own journey of seeking God's presence a couple of years ago. I travelled with a couple of clergy friends to spend time in a Benedictine monastery in Northern New Mexico – Christ in the Desert Monastery. I spent three nights with the Benedictine monks at Christ in the Desert monastery in New Mexico, who come from that tradition. Set 12 miles off the highway on a dirt road, past the National Forest signs, I literally went into the wilderness to be with the monks. To join in the rhythm of Christian community is probably the closest way to experience what the disciples did when they first stayed with Jesus.

It was my first time in an all-male monastery, and as we entered this community, I became very aware of how ordered and simple the lifestyle was, even for those of us visiting.

Our meals were simple and delicious – the brothers don't skimp on good food for all, and it was all fresh. We had some initial fumbling in figuring out the rules to the meals – not seeing where to pick up our tableware and napkins, or how to sit. The brothers swirled around us, I'm sure they were used to newcomers botching things up. The evening meal was in silence, and short.

The liturgy of most days including seven times for prayer – I think I made it to three or four times a day, and following an exact pattern prescribed, with work periods scheduled between these times.

Time slowed down. Without wifi and external stimulation, my friends and I began to relax, began to enter silence as a friend. I was left without distractions of the internet (for most of the day, cell phones or TV, or work or finishing the last task on the list. Instead deep silence enveloped the valley, and I felt that emotional and spiritual nakedness that is the gift of such places. The natural world is indifferent to our needs.

There our ego lets go, because there is no place to use it. While I travelled with a couple of pastor colleagues, each of us was in silence for most of the day.

When I was in the wilderness with the monks, I realized that I could *be* more than do. I could discover who I am when there are no expectations other than being a child of God.

These are the practices that help us name and identify what we are seeking, and where we are dwelling. Jesus' answers to the seeking of the disciples doesn't come with tremendous spiritual razzle-dazzle. The way of Jesus is embodied in simple gifts.

The gift of time.

The gift of presence.

The gift of sharing in bread and cup a few times of day.

The gift of silence and prayer.

The challenges in spiritual living are not that any one of these things is hard. It is instead the challenge of continuing on this way when instant returns do not show up in our lives, when we find that living counter to a social-media distractifying life can make us feel left out, and perhaps even irrelevant.

One other thing I noticed about the Benedictine brothers – although they lived in an isolated community, they were not narrow people. On the contrary – those who choose to delve in the deepest ways of Jesus become expansive, and they become inclusive. They are cosmopolitan in a striking way – they have learned to live deeply in the place they inhabit, yet they care for the whole world from that place.

They have learned the art that Martin Luther King claimed in stating:

"An individual has not started living until he/she can rise above the narrow confines of his/her individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

The fruits of the spirit of those who follow Jesus and abide with him are gifts that our world desperately needs in these times when division, and rumors, and rumors of rumors is threatening our civic fabric.

Where will we dwell, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, this year?

Will it be in spaces and places where God's love shines into us?

Will it be to find the love?

This is a time to go deep, friends, to dwell on Jesus words, to follow Jesus way. In going deep we are called to be inspired by the words of Martin Luther King,

“Faith in the dawn arises from the faith that God is good and just. When one believes this, [one] knows the contradictions of life are neither final nor ultimate. One can walk through the dark night with the radiant conviction that all things work together for good for those that love God.”

Amen.