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“Come and See”

A sermon by Charles L. Campbell

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Isaiah 49:1–7; John 1:29–46

In our story this morning, Jesus makes his very first appearance in the Gospel of John. From the moment he sets foot on the stage, things become a bit frantic, somewhat odd, rather unsettled. John the Baptist sees Jesus, and immediately he goes to preaching. He seems a little bit out of control, if you listen carefully. John doesn't seem to be able to get what he wants to say perfectly into words. Everything appears a little bit too big for him. So he piles up one title, one description after another, none of which, he knows, is fully adequate. “Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” he proclaims. Twice he says that. “I saw the Spirit descend on him. I did, like a dove. I saw it with my own eyes! I didn't know him, but I was told the one on whom the Spirit descends is the one I'm looking for. I saw it! He is the one on whom the Spirit rests. He is the one who will baptize with the Spirit. He is the Son of God.” And then he resorts to a riddle: “After me comes one who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” What? “After me comes one who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”

You have to take a little breath after listening to John preach. He seems to be a little bit overwhelmed when he sees Jesus. In the presence of Jesus, John the Baptist is reduced to this torrent of language, even to the ambiguity of a kind of riddle. As a preacher and a teacher of preachers, I have some sympathy for John the Baptist. I feel for him. He reminds me of the central character from Dostoyevsky's short story, “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man.” Maybe some of you

have read it. In the story, an unnamed man has a dream. In the dream, he sees a vision of the Gospel in all of its glory. After the vision, he has to become a preacher. He has to start preaching. He says, “I made up my mind to preach from that very moment and, of course, to go on preaching all of my life. I am going to preach, I want to preach. What? Why, truth. For I have beheld truth, I have beheld it with mine own eyes, I have beheld it in all of its glory!” (Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man: A Fantastic Story,” in *The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, trans. David Magarshack (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 283-84.)

But there is only one problem. He cannot get it into words. “I do not know how to put it into words,” he declares. “After my dream I lost the knack of putting things into words. At least, onto the most necessary and most important words. But never mind, I shall go on and I shall keep on talking, for I have indeed beheld it with my own eyes, though I cannot describe what I saw.” (Dostoevsky, “Ridiculous Man,” 284-85.) And the man looks ridiculous, and everyone ridicules him. They even call him a madman.

And there’s John the Baptist. I think a little bit like that ridiculous man. He’s seen something in Jesus. He’s seen it! And he has to preach, so he pulls out every title he can think of. He tells his riddles. He tries his best to put what he has seen into words.

John’s struggle, his torrent of language, seems somehow appropriate for Jesus’ first appearance in the Gospel of John. Throughout this Gospel, Jesus is nothing, if not elusive in both his speech and his actions. No title can capture him or contain him. He is always crossing boundaries and shattering categories and unsettling presuppositions. Often, he himself is a kind of riddle people are trying to sort through. So maybe it’s appropriate that John the Baptist struggles to find adequate words to describe and proclaim Jesus.

It seems that John’s disciples don’t quite get what he is saying, either—despite all of John’s preaching and efforts. They hear enough to leave John and to follow Jesus. But when Jesus asks them, “What are you seeking?” did you notice their

response? “Rabbi,” they say, “teacher, where are you staying?” Rabbi? Teacher? That’s it? Rabbi? Teacher? What happened to the Lamb of God, what happened to the Son of God, what happened to the “one who comes after me but ranks ahead of me because he was before me”? What happened to all of that? Rabbi? Teacher?

And their question. Did you notice their question? “Where are you staying?” That has to be one of the strangest questions in the New Testament. Jesus comes up to them and asks, “What are you seeking?” And they reply, “Teacher, can you give us your address?”

John’s disciples don’t seem to have very high expectations. If it’s me, and Jesus comes up and says, “What are you seeking?” I hope I would say something like, “Can you tell me the meaning of life? Can you show me the mysteries of the universe? Why is there so much suffering in the world?” But the disciples ask, “Where are you staying?” It seems a little odd.

But Jesus doesn’t criticize them for their question. Jesus simply says, “Come and see.” Come and see. So maybe, just maybe, John’s disciples make exactly the right request. Maybe what we really need is not the answers to our questions or all the right words but time with Jesus. Maybe the most important thing really is to know where Jesus is staying so we can go and be with him. The Gospel really is not about our ideas or answers or human words. The Gospel is about a person, the Word made Flesh. “Where are you staying?” “Come and see!”

Come and see—that phrase appears several times in the Gospel of John at various points along the way. There are many layers to it, just as there are many layers to almost all of Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John. Jesus is not just saying, “Come and see where I am physically staying.” He is, of course, not just talking about physical sight at all. He is speaking about discernment, about belief.

In John, come and see is the call to discipleship. Follow me. Follow me and discern and believe. I think the order is significant here. First come, then see. I always thought first I believe and discern and then I follow. It’s not the case here. It’s not that we first discern and then follow; after all, the disciples just called Jesus

Rabbi, Teacher. They don't seem to have discerned much of anything about him despite all of John's words. Jesus says, "Come and see. Follow me, and on the way, discern and believe."

Come and see. I suspect many of us have had that kind of experience. You come to church on a Sunday morning to worship. You've done it hundreds of times. Maybe it's become routine. Maybe even it's just a habit. You're not sure what good it really does anymore, but you come. That is what disciples do. You come, you sing, you pray, you sit through the sermon, then you come to the Table. You hear the old words, you break the bread, and you share the cup. You come to the Table where Jesus stays. His death and his resurrection and his love become real again. And your faith is renewed.

Maybe you go to visit someone in the hospital or maybe in a nursing home. Maybe on that particular day, you really don't want to go. Maybe you're even dreading it. But you do go. It's what disciples do. And you find that Jesus stays in those places, too. And you see him there in the most unlikely face, or you smell him there in the most unlikely smell, and you come to a deeper faith.

Or maybe you go to serve a meal at Urban Ministries. You really have no desire to go on that occasion—you have many other things to do, you're very busy—but you just go with a group, maybe out of a sense of duty. Or maybe if it's the first time, out of curiosity. But you go. It's what disciples do. And you hand out the food to the lines of tired and hungry men and women. And you realize maybe for the first time that Jesus stays there, too. And you come to a new understanding of Jesus' presence in those who are poor and oppressed. I was hungry and you gave me food. You begin to discern the way of Jesus in a fresh light. Maybe you even begin to read the Scripture in new ways with new insights.

Come and see. Just come and see. Most of us, I suspect, have had that kind of experience at one time or another. Maybe it's why we're here today. And then many of us bump up against the same challenge that John faced—the challenge of putting it all into words. The challenge of sharing, what we have seen, what we have discerned, what we believe. Maybe you know that problem, too. Many of us,

myself included, have enough trouble sharing a good movie that we've seen with somebody. We have enough trouble getting into words something as seemingly simple as a smell or a taste or a touch. That's hard enough! Now we're trying to put into words our deepest faith, our most profound experiences, our very faith itself. Maybe we can identify with John and Dostoevsky's Ridiculous Man: "I've seen it! I've seen it! I've got to share it! But I cannot get it into the most necessary words, the most important words."

That's actually what happens to the disciples in the story today. Just like it happened to John. They go to where Jesus is staying, and they remain with him for a time. Something happens. We are not told what it is. I wish I knew. Something happens there, and they do indeed come to discern and believe. The next thing you know, Jesus is not just a rabbi, a teacher. Rather, they're out inviting others to come and follow Jesus. But they run into the same problem as John the Baptist. The same problem that we run into when we try to put it into words. "We have found the Messiah!" they say. "We have found the Anointed One!" Did you notice they are completely different titles from the ones John was using? "We have found the Messiah!" "We have found the Anointed One!" "We found the one about whom Moses and the law and the prophets wrote. Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth—we found him!"

But there is the problem. Moses and the prophets never ever spoke about one from Nazareth. That little backwater town is actually never even mentioned in the Old Testament. Not once. But the disciples are so carried away with Jesus that they forget all of that, and it spills out. It's no wonder Nathaniel asks them, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Well, certainly not the Messiah, the Anointed One. Based on Scripture, Nathaniel is absolutely right. The disciples reach an impasse. Messiah—Nazareth. Nazareth—Messiah. The two don't go together. No way, no how. The disciples' words break down. The old categories simply cannot contain or hold Jesus. Something new is happening. So at the end of words, the disciple Philip simply says, "Come and see."

Come and see. The same invitation issued by Jesus is now the invitation on the lips of the disciples. Come and see. It's the same invitation we, as the church, now have

to offer. Come and see. Come to this table. Come to the hospital. Come to the homeless shelter. Come to the places where Jesus stays. Come! Come to the baptismal font, where Jesus still baptizes with the Holy Spirit. We've seen it! Come to the Scripture where the Word made Flesh comes to life. We've experienced it! Come to the community of faith where we seek to love one another.

Come and see. This invitation reminds us as a church of our deepest, most profound calling. We're really not called to explain Jesus. We're not called to capture him in the right words. That's not easy for a teacher of preaching to say. But it's not our calling to explain Jesus or capture him in just the right words. We are called instead to be the kind of community where people can come and see Jesus. We are called to be the kind of community where people can come and say, "Yes! Jesus stays here, too!" Yes, the spirit that rested on Jesus, the same spirit that was poured out on Pentecost, that spirit is alive and at work here in this place among this people. Jesus stays here, too! Ultimately, it's not all of our words or our theologies or our doctrines that matter. What matters is that people can come into our midst and see Jesus.

On his office wall, the great theologian, Karl Barth, had a painting. It was a painting of the Crucifixion. He kept this particular painting because it contained in it the figure of John the Baptist. In the painting, rather anachronistically, John is holding a Bible, and he is pointing with his very large hand to Jesus on the cross. It is a fascinating painting because your eyes are constantly directed away from John the Baptist to the larger, more central figure of Jesus, to whom he is pointing. It's like what happens in our text: After John bears his testimony, he disappears. That's what happens in the painting. Your eyes are drawn away from John to the one on the cross. It's extraordinary.

Not too long ago, I noticed something odd about John the Baptist in the painting. I spent a little time looking at him, and I noticed something odd. I had viewed the painting no telling how many times before. I had even used it in classes to talk about preaching. This time, however, I noticed something that I had never seen. I looked as closely as I could at the figure of John the Baptist. I couldn't believe it, but there it was! *John's mouth is closed. He is not speaking.* Now that's a strange

thing for John, if you think about it. Long before the television shows, John the Baptist was called “The Voice.” He was The Voice, crying in the wilderness. That was his identity: The Voice. But not here. His mouth is closed. There are no words. He simply points to Jesus.

Come and see. Thanks be to God.

Charles L. Campbell is Professor of Homiletics at Duke Divinity School. His work focuses on the biblical, theological, and ethical dimensions of preaching. He is specifically interested in the Christological and apocalyptic aspects of preaching, the role of preaching in relation to the “principalities and powers,” and contemporary homiletical theory. He is currently writing a theological commentary on First Corinthians. His publications include Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly (with Johan Cilliers, 2012); The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching (2002); The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context (with Stanley P. Saunders, 2000); and Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology (1997). He is past president of the Academy of Homiletics.

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