

Sermon, 20 January 2008—Second Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40; First Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

Every year, on the Second Sunday after Epiphany, we hear one of the early stories in the Gospel of John. These stories are early in two senses: they are the first stories we come across in the Gospel, and they are the oldest layer of the Gospel. These are pithy witty anecdotes, in which Jesus is the still point around which others come and go, spun by verbal exchanges with the Word made flesh. These are also deeply Jewish accounts: God himself provides the lamb whose death atones for sin (and not our sin only, but the sin of the world), whose sacrifice ransoms the bound son, whose flesh is eaten at Passover, and whose blood averts the Angel of Death; and yet to encounter this Lamb is to meet the Messiah, the king of Israel, about whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, and who draws to him all his Father gives him.

Now, in the passage we heard today, we see and hear Jesus for the first time in the Gospel. These words come shortly after the massive opening: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and to all who believed in his Name, he gave power to become children of God, and of his fullness we have all received grace and truth.” After such an opening, we ought to be gripping the arms of our chairs and leaning forward, holding our breath, waiting to see and hear what God-with-us will do.

John the Evangelist, Jewish though he is, has soaked long in Greek culture. His Gospel, unlike the others, is ironic and transcendent, subtle and frustrating, dangerous and indifferent to our addiction to reassurance. Today we heard John’s account of Jesus’ baptism and of the call of his first

disciples—veiled and indirect and at first reading quite dissatisfying. But what exactly happens here?

Jesus' first appearance in this Gospel is only a walk-through. Jesus says nothing, does nothing, walks across the back of the stage—entrance left, exit right—without even slowing down. The Baptizer is the only one who speaks: “there goes the Lamb of God!” This seems at first an odd way to introduce the person you want someone to pay attention to. But it works: delay heightens anticipation. It is also the first stroke of the Evangelist's genius: human beings notice what matters as it vanishes. How many of us have thought “if I ever have that opportunity again, I know what I will do next time, because this time, I missed it”? And isn't it just like God to move past us so quietly that someone else has to call our attention to what we aren't seeing and don't get, leaving us to wonder about all the previous times when holiness passed by while we were too busy and oblivious to notice?

But the Baptizer sees what God is doing, and the Evangelist—as the thorough postmodern writer he is—doesn't give us the facts, but only the Baptizer's account of the facts. The reader doesn't see the outpouring of the Holy Spirit onto Jesus in the form of a dove, as we do in other Gospels, since that moment of sanctification cannot be known by the reader; instead the reader only hears a claim the Baptizer makes. Notice how thoroughly the Evangelist underscores this: the Baptizer *sees* Jesus walking towards him, he tells us he *saw* the Spirit descend on Jesus, and he says finally, “I have *seen* and have borne witness.” We've already been told that the “true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world.” When that light finally enters the story, we are told three times that the Baptizer “sees.”

The action of the story begins, though, when *Jesus* turns and *sees*. On the next day, when the Baptizer again exclaims over Jesus, two of John's

disciples decide to go after Jesus. At that moment, “Jesus turned and saw them following.” It is almost as if this Evangelist were saying that our perceptions of God remain disengaged, wistful and wishful, until God turns to us and *sees us*. We know, of course, that God holds us all in the Divine awareness; we are never out of God’s sight. But our lived experience of God is hardly so steady; we have moments of closeness, but more of distance. We recognize what the Evangelist describes: one day the truth opens up in us, and it is as if God turns and sees us. We feel exposed, vulnerable, known inside. When what we have hoped for or what we have feared begins to come to pass, we can see ourselves as wondrous or dreadful. We are caught up in the truth about us: sometimes shame at our pettiness, sometimes desolation at our suffering, sometimes humility and joy at our lovableness in the eyes of someone we also care about. Whichever it is, we have a sense of being under unbearable scrutiny, under God’s magnifying lens. It seems to be true that Jesus *can* turn and *see us*.

Jesus’ first words in the Gospel come next. At that moment of greatest vulnerability, when we realize we are under God’s gaze, at that moment, God speaks. In this shrewd Gospel of conversations and irony and endless layers, Jesus makes no proclamation, but instead asks “what do you seek?” Ah, yes: at the moment we find ourselves exposed in God’s presence, the only question is “what do you want? what are you about?”

An initial meaning is the simple and obvious one: “Are you looking for something?” It is what any stranger would ask of another when he turns to find himself being followed. But for the Evangelist, the other layers of the question never disappear. The first is “do you want something from me?”—the question Jesus asks, even silently, of anyone who approaches him. Jesus is also asking about life: “What are you looking for in your life?”

What are you trying to accomplish? Where are you headed?” Beneath that is the inquiry into whether or not you are open to life: “Is your life about search? Are you on pilgrimage?” Finally, because of the way Koine Greek is written, a Greek reader would hear, within the phrase itself, not only a question, but a description: “what you seek.” So Jesus *is* making a proclamation. He only needs to add “I am,” the name of God—which he will use over and over in this Gospel—to say “I am what you seek.”

This Evangelist is the master of such density of meaning. Much of his message is conveyed by the misunderstandings that arise when characters in the story cannot grasp the spiritual level from which the Word made flesh communicates. They miss the layers and so miss the meanings. Because of this, John the Evangelist is the master of Gospel irony. We can hear his irony in the response of the two tag-alongs. They don’t answer Jesus’ question, but, as if they want to deflect this divine uncomfortable scrutiny of them, they ask one of their own instead: “where are you staying?”

It seems harmless enough on the surface, nothing more than asking where Jesus is spending the night—like asking “do you know any good hotels in the area?” But the Greek verb has an intensity we miss in English, because the word translated “stay” can also be translated “abide.” So the question they do not realize they are asking is where Jesus is rooted: “What sustains you? What is the source of your energy and your rest?”

These new followers do not yet know to whom they speak. They cannot yet see the divinity before them. So they do not understand what a perceptive reader will notice: their question is also an attempt to understand how the Word of God eternally abides with God and as God. Ultimately our peace and our truest home is the Godhead, of that this Evangelist has no doubt. So the question “where do you, God, abide?” expresses the deepest

longing of every spiritual quest. Where is the permanence of what we most desire? Where can we be sure to find it? The entire Gospel is written to answer this question.

Towards the end of this Gospel, when Jesus' glorification is imminent and when Jesus is completing his conveyance of all God has given him to those he no longer calls servants, but friends, Jesus says "abide in my love" and even "abide in me." His last words at that last supper are his prayer that, just as the Son and the Father are in each other, so Jesus' followers may be in them also. Abiding is pervasive, total, eternal; we are to be *in* God. That is Jesus' prayer for us and therefore his promise to us.

However, in this first chapter of his Gospel, the Evangelist probably means us to feel amused that this overly pert and inquisitive pair of disciples tries to deflect Jesus' interest in them—the undeviating gaze of God—with a question of their own, asking Jesus where he is staying. But they have engaged the master questioner and champion conversationalist. Jesus calls their bluff. "Come and see," he says—no doubt with a smile. As the Baptizer has learned to see, so these men also are to be brought to *see*. "Walk with me," Jesus says, "look around you; learn to walk looking."

Once again, Jesus' seemingly casual reply corresponds on every level. It is a friendly response to a friendly question. Warm relationships often start when you invite someone over to your home. But the Evangelist wants us to realize we can only begin to discern Jesus' essential groundedness by watching him, and that means remaining with him over time and observing him and coming to imitate him and be like him. "Walk with me," Jesus says, "look around you; learn to walk looking."

If we want to know Light from Light, we must learn how to see God's participation in our life, the mysteries of God's presence in us. Our spiritual

eyes must open so we can contemplate God at work in us and dwelling in us. What this Gospel shows us is the first dim glimpse we get: something is going on here and I want to watch it, because I feel more alive, more alert, more urgent in its presence. And the place to look for that is not in church, but in your daily life. Come to Church not for a glimpse of God; glimpse God in the small opportunities of healing and hope and patience and reconciliation in your life. Come to Church to give thanks for what you see God doing in your life and to ask that your eyes may continue to be opened to see more clearly day by day.

At the end of this story these followers begin to see. Andrew goes looking for Simon and tells him that he has found the Messiah. His sight is not yet completely focused, but after supper with Jesus, he knows he has seen something extraordinary which he wants his brother to have a share in.

In this Gospel, as in life, things are not always what they appear, and seemingly innocent questions stretch over a spiritual abyss that opens into infinite reaches beyond us. The message of this Gospel is that nothing changes for us unless we are willing to come and see, and that we cannot see unless God calls us and opens our eyes. And yet, John the Evangelist, our patron in this congregation, wants to guide us into that Truth that sets us free where peace and joy abide; and we can only come to abide there when we follow Christ and come to know him.

This pattern, in other words, the Evangelist holds out for us as the essence of evangelism. The first words of Jesus in the Gospel of John are a question asked of those who follow without knowing why; and in response to their question they receive an offer to “come and see.” To begin, no answer can be given, because there is not enough experience to interpret or to understand. Only participation can be offered, but it must be active alert

participation: the one with the question must “come” and must “see.” You must walk looking. What those called by God are interested in is not a theory, but life; and life is for action and insight, not hearsay. Walk looking.

Our Annual Meeting is next week. As it approaches, ask yourself what you seek here, and whether or not there is anything you have come and seen, as you have abided in this place, that would lead you to say, “this is the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises of God.” Those are the activities we want to strengthen and to offer to others, so that the abundant life God has promised might come to be known as actual among us, as the place where God abides, whom, as Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, one God, we praise this day and hope to praise forever.