

Taking the long way

Eternal God, our beginning and our end: bring us with the whole creation to your glory, hidden through past ages and made known in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A Collect for Epiphany 2A, Additional Collects, Common Worship, Church of England

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
Isaiah 49:1-7, Psalm 40:1-12, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-42
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ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY
EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL
Los Olivos, California
THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: JOHN 1:29-42

John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When 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?" 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. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He 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).

Widening Circles

~Rainer Maria Rilke~

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.

I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?

Book of Hours, I 2

In 2006 the country-western crossover band the Dixie Chicks had a multiplatinum recording called "Taking the Long Way." The title song is an ode to non-conformity with verses like: "Well, I never seem to do it like anybody else. Maybe someday, I'm gonna settle down. If you ever want to find me I can still be found... Taking the long way." It has a double refrain with "taking the long way" and "I could never follow" interspersed among the verses.

For any of us who have taken the long way in life – and in our faith lives (often the same thing) – today's gospel reading holds some important points of identification.

John the Baptist recognizes Jesus coming toward him – John's chief role in life and a sign of hope for the rest of us – that either we will be able to recognize Jesus at critical moments or that we will have our own John the Baptist to point and say, "look here is Jesus...." Perhaps there will be many John and Joan the Baptists

for all of us....

In the gospel reading today, John stands with two of his own disciples and John shows them Jesus. They immediately quit following John and start following Jesus... so: unlike the Dixie Chicks, these are people who are, apparently, good at following. But Jesus stops them in their tracks with an arresting question, perhaps the heart of this gospel reading: **"What are you looking for?"**

Maybe they and Jesus know that they can't answer that question – or that the question has many answers.

In any case, they ask Jesus, "Where are you staying?"

That question also had either no or many answers and Jesus responds, **"Come and see."**

And here we may have the main take-away from what we are hearing in Scripture today.

What these disciples and Jesus all discovered is that the only way is the long way. It is

something that all of us either know or are discovering.

We may want a quick and easy response to “What are you looking for?” We may want Jesus to be in one place, in a predictable, identifiable domicile (and domesticated as a result) (like my church or your church, Christian religion, our religious practices) but it doesn’t take long to realize Jesus is always on the move, wild and free in the world.

So, if we really look at all the goings on in this gospel reading, as in much of scripture, this is all happening outside the church institution, outside the approved structures, beyond and away from the conventional practices of religion.

The Christian life is a constant re-presentation to us of the question: “What are you looking for?”

In some seasons of our lives we can tolerate that question and in other seasons we simply smile vaguely and genially when we hear it again... maybe change the subject.

We may assume, those of us who have had long experience in church or in churches (or around various types of church people), that the most important thing is the *answer* to a question. People bring their pragmatism to church and so these communal gatherings

often focus on being the library reference desk of old, the Wikipedia of today.

What’s your question?
Here’s your answer.

Jesus, not so much.

Jesus isn’t burdened by being useful, helpful, and practical.

He asks again and again, what is it your heart yearns for? What wholeness are you seeking? What life do you desire?

Our not knowing the response or how to respond to these questions does not make Jesus anxious. When we either cannot fully comprehend the question or when our responses are partial or temporary, Jesus, who is God, simply draws us, who are in God, into relationship and travels with us – invites us to be with him.

“Come and see.”

When Andrew and the other disciple heard “come and see” they may have felt that they would find some ashram or monastery or temple to call home. They could unpack, inspect the decorating, the landscaping and get to know the cook.

But “come and see” held nothing of an arrival for Jesus – nor for those who traveled with him. “Where are you staying?” did not have a concrete, static, finite

answer. It wasn't a narrow, fixed identity or place.

"I am staying in motion" might have been one response from Jesus. "I am staying with you" might have been equally true. "I am staying with humanity" and "I am staying in all places, in the heart of God, beyond time" yet another – all beyond the ready understanding of those newly declared disciples and beyond our typical understanding as well.

"Come and see" the long road, the widening circles... was the best thing for Andrew, the other disciple, eventually Simon who would be Peter and countless others through the millennia (including us).

When Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, Jesus did not ask, "what are you looking for?" He didn't even ask, "who are you?" Rather, Jesus said, "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas." (Peter)

Here we encounter another aspect of Jesus in which we can realize that God knows us – knows who we are and that we are in a state of becoming. The encounter with Simon was not a one-time-only fortune telling, not a brief horoscope reading in which Simon got to look into the murky future to discover some sort of definition of himself. It is instead revelation of the identity of Jesus as

profoundly in God but in us – and that he is one in whom we can seek our whole, our true selves in connection with the different other and others.

There was much more to Simon's life that unfolded through the ensuing years as Simon lived the life of "come and see" with Jesus. For Jesus to say "I know who you are" was only the beginning.

So it is with us.

There is so much more to be revealed and experienced.

We begin to discover it at the font where we hear: "you are Christ's own forever."

We reach out our hands, again and again, to receive Christ's body and blood – which, for the most part, we don't understand – "bread of heaven, cup of salvation."

So in the freedom of "come and see," listen to this familiar passage of scripture:

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent God's only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we loved God, but that God loved us

and sent God's Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and God's love is brought to perfection in us." —1 John 4:7-12 (Fr. Richard Rohr paraphrase)

And this from John 15: "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. . . . This I command you: love one another." John 15:12-14, 17 (Fr. Richard Rohr paraphrase)

As you likely know, I am here today as an expression between the national and international Lutheran and Episcopal Churches to gather and interchange, recognize and affirm our embrace of our shared covenant, *Called to Common Mission*, in which we established ourselves, at the dawning of the 21st century, as being in full communion. And, more importantly, in this time of this month, recognizing the life and ministry of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who layed down his life for his friends, and our shared life and mission of extending the love of Jesus and the work of Dr. King in our very-much-fraught and fractured

neighborhood, culture, nation and world.

We can be encouraged, again, that like Dr. King, the life of Jesus unfolded and continues to unfold in the world, the whole large, real world, among all creatures, all living beings, the great diversity to which we are all called, and called together in love — mostly not sheltered in churches, not confined to religion.

In this 21st century, we can enter ever more fully into the realization that Jesus did not come to a club, a clan, a country club, especially not such entities with increasingly non-sensical names like "Episcopalian" or "Lutheran."

In her recent book: *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, Diana Butler Bass writes: "What will make a difference to the future is awakening to a faith that fully communicates God's love—a love that transforms how we believe, what we do, and who we are in the world."

We are called to Rilke's "widening circles that reach out across the world..." and to the vast diversity that is within God and in each of us and to which Jesus calls us by saying, simply: "Come and see."

Come and see what you share with your Latino and Latina

brothers and sisters, what you share with Islamic neighbors, among people of African or Asian descent who share this world – people of differing economic or educational levels – who are all in God... Come and see that I am staying in and with all that lives in the natural environment and in the fabric of earth...

As in the relational reality of the Trinity, “Come and see” is something that is done together, is always interconnected in love – a true gift that we have within our faith communities but,

increasingly importantly, shared together, Bethania and St. Mark’s – and shared with the all who are around us, the world that God so loves.

Jesus still asks: “What are you looking for?”

It may be we are taking the long way, but together with those we think are like us, who may seem to be different from us, and the whole of creation, we can, by the grace of Divine Reality, come and see.

Amen.