

Last week, tragically, nobody got to hear my sermon on John 1:19-34, in which John the Baptizer appears, because it was so cold that we canceled church. And it's too bad, because we were going to sing this terrific New Year's hymn and I was going to lay on you all the point that in John's gospel, the birth narrative is not about Jesus but about us: *we* are given power to become the children of God. But hold that thought, that we become the children of God, because it is the direct antecedent to today's reading, in which one after another, people are drawn to Jesus out of curiosity and fascination.

John often moves slowly, but here the disciples come pell-mell. The Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God, and two of his disciples peel off to follow Jesus. One of them goes and fetches his brother. The next day Jesus calls Philip, and Philip invites Nathanael. That's five disciples in two days. The posse is forming.

But John wants us to know not just that Jesus moved fast, but that people were primed. They are all attention, and they're full of questions. When John's two disciples approach Jesus, he asks them, "What are you looking for?" and they answer with another question, "Where are you staying?" "Staying," unfortunately, is the translation for the word that means "abiding." "Abiding" is used over 40 times in John's gospel, and it doesn't just mean "staying." It means being grounded, belonging. The concept of abiding with Jesus develops over the course of the gospel, and here it begins with a question that's sort of about location, but we know that there are layers and layers of meaning yet to develop. The disciples are just starting.

Jesus' answer to the inquirers is "Come and see." "Come and see" becomes a refrain, as Andrew goes back to tell his brother Peter, and Philip answers

Nathanael's skeptical question about the man from Nazareth. "Come and see" means "you have to be there." It means, "I can't tell you in words; you have to experience it." People like John's disciples are asking serious questions, seeking, if you will, the meaning of life. Jesus says that there is not an answer to be given. The only way to find out is by doing: following, experiencing, encountering the Lamb of God.

So what is that like? The 20th-century poet W. H. Auden wrote a long poem called "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio." In the part about the slaughter of the innocents, Auden has Herod explain his motivations for trying to get rid of the newborn king of the Jews. Herod says that under Christ, things would turn upside down:

Reason will be replaced by Revelation. Instead of Rational Law, objective truths perceptible to any who will undergo the necessary intellectual discipline, Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions... Whole cosmogonies will be created out of some forgotten personal resentment, complete epics written in private languages, the daubs of schoolchildren ranked above the greatest masterpieces. Idealism will be replaced by Materialism. Life after death will be an eternal dinner party where all the guests are 20 years old... Justice will be replaced by Pity as the cardinal human virtue, and all fear of retribution will vanish... The New Aristocracy will consist exclusively of hermits, bums and permanent invalids. The Rough Diamond, the Consumptive Whore, the bandit who is good to his mother, the epileptic girl who has a way with animals will be the heroes and heroines of the New Age, when the general, the statesman, and the philosopher have become the butt of every farce and satire.

I think Herod is right on the button! That's a picture of what Jesus is inviting people to come and see: justice replaced by pity. An aristocracy of hermits, bums, and invalids. The flourishing of peculiar private languages such that entire epics can be written in them (and one can't help but think of Harry Potter in this regard). Life

after death, an eternal dinner party. To the extent that we can resonate with it, it's because we ourselves have "been and seen." We've seen the sacred embodied in the ordinary—the elderly man pushing his wife in her wheelchair along the bike path, the surprising overlap between the ancient story of Naaman and our own youth, the feast of the kingdom every last Thursday of the month. I still treasure the memory of the kids' Christmas pageant a few years ago when Tucker played all three kings by the ingenious stratagem of changing his turban twice: "the daubs of children ranked above the greatest masterpieces." Two weeks ago we sang "Silent Night" and lit candles in this very room, and it was just us and your standard-issue candles, but travelers had come home, the darkness was velvety, and time stood still while we took in the miracle that God is revealed in a newborn baby. There is more to come and see, but we've gotten a foretaste of it.

There are some truths that cannot be expressed adequately in propositional language. You have to have been there. That's why Jesus answers his inquirers, "Come and see," and why they answer the questions of others by saying, "Come and see." "Behold the Lamb of God" is not an informative thing for John to say; it's a provocation of curiosity, impelling the disciples to go after Jesus to find out more. Brian McLaren, a writer about Christianity in the vein of Phyllis Tickle, says of faith that

what matters most is not our *status* but our *trajectory*, not where we are but where we're going, not where we stand but where we're headed. . . . [Religion] is at its best when it leads us forward, when it guides us on our spiritual growth as individuals and in our cultural evolution as a species. Unfortunately, religion often becomes more of a cage than a guide, holding us back rather than summoning us onward, a buffer to constructive change rather than a catalyst for it.

I listened to a fascinating interview with McLaren last week, which maybe we should listen to in Sunday School, and he talked about how uncomfortable Christians can be with Jesus' open-endedness. Jesus says, "I have more to teach you, but you're not ready," and "You will do greater things than me," but we have a closed canon and don't think he can have meant it. Yet Jesus is inviting his disciples on a wild journey, a journey for which there is no map—a way that they will make by walking it. In his farewell to his disciples in John's gospel, Jesus says, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," and Philip says, "Yes, but where are you going?" He wants a map of the Way. Jesus' response is to say that Philip already knows; it's a Way of being that Jesus has been showing them the whole time. Don't ask for instructions or descriptions, but improvise the Way where *you* are. It will probably involve bums and invalids, possibly children's art as well, which is good to keep in mind because the Way often takes us into the offices of generals, statesmen and philosophers who need to be enlightened about healthcare for the poor, the true mandate of universities, and how to raise state revenue responsibly. It's easy to get distracted by the splendor of those offices, but remember the bandits and the whores in Jesus' party. (William Barber)

None of us can tell others what to expect when we get up and follow Jesus.

The closest we can probably come is what the chorus says in part IV of Auden's

*Oratorio:*

He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.  
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;  
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

Let us pray: God of all people,

You called many by name, asking them to follow Jesus and obey. Call us by name, and help us to follow and obey. Amen.