

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,  
Oak Park, IL on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany,  
January 16, 2011 (Year A) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

*“When Jesus turned and saw (John’s disciples) 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.’”*  
John 1:38-39

If you’ve ever seen the 1983 holiday classic *A Christmas Story*, you’ll likely remember the scene where Randy – Ralphie’s little brother – sits atop his father’s shoulders at the town’s Christmas parade. It’s the only way Randy can see, since when you think about it, his eye-level view – like that of most 6-year-olds – would otherwise be stomachs and knees. That’s a pretty limited view, and yet even when lifted up it can be hard to grasp what we’re seeing, as evidenced in the differing accounts of two young spectators at Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade in 2008. Witnessing a break-way Energizer Bunny balloon one young boy cried with delight, “It’s running away because it doesn’t want to be with the other balloons,” while a younger child, watching the bunny’s handlers deflate the run-away hare, wept mournfully, “Bunny is melting!”

Neither child understood exactly what they were seeing, just as grownups in today’s Gospel – the disciples of John the Baptist – do not fully grasp what they see at first. Clearly, they’ve heard John testify before that Jesus is the Son of God, and hear him say again, “Here is the Lamb of God” of whom I spoke. They aren’t sure, though, exactly what this means. They’ve seen and heard enough from John to follow Jesus, but they’re not quite certain who it is they’re following – or why. Consequently Jesus turns to them and asks the million-dollar-question, “What are you looking for?” It’s a gripping moment – for them *and* for us. In fact, it stops us dead in our tracks, since most of us don’t know the answer. We know the *question* all too well – it’s one reason we’re in church this morning – but we probably don’t know the answer.

We know that we're looking for *something*, but we aren't sure what it is. And so we browse around in different places – in malls, bars, bedrooms, even churches – uncertain what we want, but hoping that we'll know it when we see it. Actually, we may even secretly hope that God will grab us by the shoulders, whirl us around, and miraculously set our lives on course and hearts on fire. Instead, though, Jesus does the opposite, putting to us this highly charged question, “What are you looking for?” . . . What do you hope the fruit of your life will be – the fruit of your striving, driving, seeking, serving? What are your goals/the desires of your heart? “What are you looking for?” is not an easy question, and yet it's one that each of us must answer before we can see and know the power and presence of God, since in truth God is already in our lives whether we see it or not, as I have usually had to learn the hard way.

Hopefully, seeing and knowing are getting easier with age, but in an earlier opportunity for learning – an opportunity for growth some might say – it took a wiser person/a John the Baptizer if you will, to show my husband Michael and me that God was with us. This person's name was Ed, and what he pointed out was that God had given the two of us pretty much what we were looking for, although we couldn't see it. We were young – parenting two toddlers– and thus stuck in a muddle of marital roles and chores. We were stressed – and off course we thought, and so made an appointment to get our marriage back on track. Ed, a good listener with a southern drawl and mutton-chop sideburns, opened our meeting with questions, and then sat back to listen. He smiled annoyingly as Michael and I whined about each other, but then called our complaints to a halt. “You're trying to put a white picket fence around your marriage,” he said, “to make it neat and tidy, but the fact is – you *have* what you're looking for. You have love; you just don't see it.”

It sounded so simple, and yet Ed's words were on the mark. We had a deep, abiding love for one another . . . and love *was* what we wanted. Moreover, it's what most people want/what they're looking for in one way or another. We're looking for acceptance,

understanding, trust, and a love that lasts even in the face of struggle. I think it's what *John's* disciples are looking for in today's Gospel, even if they do not know it consciously, which they don't. On the surface they are clueless what they're seeking, and so when Jesus asks them the million-dollar question, John's disciples respond with a question of their own that *seems* to change the subject. "Rabbi, where are you staying?" they ask, and Jesus answers, "Come and see." It seems such a simple exchange, and yet there is more than meets the eye, as seen in the Hebrew word for "staying."

This word – translated here as "staying" (verse 38), is actually identical to the word translated "remained" six verses earlier. "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove," John says of Jesus in verse 32, "and it *remained* on him" John might just as well have said that the Spirit *stayed* with Jesus – abided with him or dwelled with him – since *all* are apt translations of the Hebrew. Moreover, all point toward the amazing truth that Father and Son abide together/dwell together in an unbreakable bond of love. Consequently, when John's disciples, ask Jesus where he is staying, they want to know more than the name of a street his hotel is on. They want to know where and with whom Jesus dwells so that they, too, might abide in that unbreakable bond of love where sins are forgiven and grace abounds.

Jesus, however, understands that words alone are not enough, and so he says to John's disciples, "Come and see." Come and see if I am the one you are looking for. Come and see if God's love and forgiveness fills the empty place inside your heart. Come and see if I am the one with power to change your life, or at least change how you understand your life and that of the world. For finally, to abide in Christ Jesus is to see life through new eyes – to see love in the midst of imperfection, forgiveness in the midst of hurt, and promise in a human born in a stable and crucified on Calvary. To do this, though, we must listen to our own hearts to find out what we are looking for, and to listen to Jesus to discover if his words – and more importantly his life and death – will direct our path/our *life* and give it meaning.

And this takes time. It takes time and relationships where we can share our thoughts, use our gifts, probe our questions, and live into our Faith. What's more it takes God to lift us where we can see and eventually know if *this* is the place/the community where we will find what we are looking for. It's a question that each of us must answer for ourselves; but it's a question worth asking. For his part, Jesus bids us, "Come and see." The rest is up to us. Amen.