

“Come and see”

[John 1:29-42](#)

(additional texts: [Isaiah 49:1-7](#); [1 Corinthians 1:1-9](#); [Psalm 40:1-12](#))

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Epiphany 2, Year A
January 16, 2011

Collect for Epiphany 2:

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ’s glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

John 1:29-42 (translation LGB):

The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said: “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is the one concerning whom I spoke when I said: ‘After me a man is coming who has actually appeared before me because he always was before me’. I did not know him. But I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel.”

John also bore witness, saying: “I saw the spirit descend like a dove from heaven and stay upon him. I did not know him. But the one who sent me to baptize with water, that one said to me: ‘The one upon whom you see the spirit descend and stay, this one is the one who baptizes with holy spirit’. I have now seen, and I bear witness: ‘This one is God’s son’.”

The next day again John was standing there, this time with two of his disciples. John looked at Jesus walking by and said: “Behold the lamb of God”. The two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned around and saw them following him. He said to them: “What do you seek?” They said to him: “*Rabbi* -- which being translated into our language means ‘teacher’ -- where are you staying?” He said to them: “Come and see.” So, they did come with him, and they saw where he was staying, and they themselves stayed with him for the remainder of the day. It was about 4 in the afternoon.

Andrew, the brother of Simon, also called Rock [*Peter* in Greek], was one of the two who had heard John’s words and had followed Jesus. The first thing that he did was to find his brother Simon to say to him: “We have found the *Messiah*” -- which being translated into our language means ‘the anointed one’. Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. When Jesus looked at Simon, he said to him: “You are indeed Simon, the son of John. You shall now be called *Keifas*” -- which being translated into our language means ‘Rock’ [*Peter* in Greek].

SERMON:

Many of you will remember the story that Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali told last November when he was with us for our 125th Anniversary Eucharist. The clergy of St. George’s had just processed over, with Bishop Michael and our own Bishop Don, from the Lord Elgin Hotel where Bishop Michael was staying. Along the way, several passers-by greeted us, took pictures of us, or otherwise just stood to watch,

wondering what was happening. The scene had reminded Bishop Michael of a similar procession in which he had been involved in England. After the procession, and on arrival at the doors of the church, two little boys who had followed the procession on their bicycles caught up with Bishop Michael and said to him: ‘Hey, mister. Where are you going?’ Bishop Michael answered: ‘To church’. Bishop Michael pointed to the church that they were about to enter. One of the boys responded: “What do you do in there?” Bishop Michael answered in words as succinct as they were appropriate: “Come and see.”¹

Today, you have heard read to you the Gospel whence these words were drawn. In fact, as we shall note this morning, the words were uttered two more times in the Gospel. The Gospel of this morning is the first of the occasions on which we hear the words “come and see”.

This morning I want to ask three simple questions in light of the Gospel reading.

1. First, in the Gospel we find two men who were told by Jesus to come and see. Who were they?
2. Second, these two men did come and they did see. What did they see and what happened as a result?
3. Third, why does the Gospel writer bother to tell us this story? What does it matter?

Three simple questions: Who? What? Why?

First, who were the two men?

The two were disciples of John. John’s ministry is described in the preceding verses of the Gospel (John 1:5-28), but it can be summarized quite simply: John was sent by God to be a faithful witness to the light that was coming into the world, and which we know did come into the world in the person of Jesus.

Yet John attracted such attention that many began to think that maybe he was the light. But, he faithfully countered their suggestions: I am not the light. I am not the coming one. I am not the prophet. I am not the anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah. I am simply here to bear faithful witness to the light that is coming into the world. If you trust me, you will believe me when I finally tell you that he has come. I am baptizing with water to make him known; when he comes he baptize not with physical water but with holy spirit.

When the fulfillment of the promise did come in the person of Jesus, John saw all the signs that he had been foretold he would see and he faithfully declared: “behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”.

The second time that John saw Jesus he uttered the same words: “behold, the lamb of God”. This time two of his disciples were standing there with him and heard John bear witness. Without more ado, they set off after Jesus, who, at some point turned around and said to them: “What are you seeking?” “Teacher,” they said to him, “where are you staying?” And Jesus responded with the words with which we began: “Come and see”.

¹ http://www.stgeorgesottawa.ca/audio/content/20101107_Bishop_Nazer-Ali.mp3

So who were these two men? They were two men who had been prepared by John to see when the time came. John's faithful preparation to be a witness, and only a witness, bore fruit in these two disciples who set off after Jesus on the basis of John's witness and saw what John had pointed them to.

But, second, what exactly did they see?

The two disciples of John called Jesus "rabbi", "teacher". What did they expect to see? They expected to follow Jesus to see his rabbinic academy. Or possibly they expected even something more, since some of the rabbis of that day were actually known to be miracle workers.

What did they see?

Well, they didn't find Jesus to be simply a rabbi. As they followed him that day and continued to follow him in the subsequent days, they rarely heard Jesus teach from the Old Testament. Nor, as the Gospel of John tells it, did they ever hear Jesus provide a friendly rabbinical guide to how you should live. In the Gospel of John Jesus does not tell people how they should live -- there is no "Sermon on the Mount" -- nor even how they should pray -- there is no "Lord's Prayer". No, they didn't just see a rabbi. Instead they found someone who always taught about himself and his Father.

Did they see a miracle worker? Perhaps. As they continued to follow Jesus they saw him do some miracles, but not too many. In the Gospel of John, there are only two miracles in the little village of Cana: one where water is turned into wine, and one where a ruler's son is healed; there are only two miracles in Jerusalem: one in which a crotchety old paralytic beside a pool in Jerusalem packed with other sick and infirm people is healed, and one in which a man born blind is healed; there are what some might see as two big miracles: the multiplication of bread and walking on water, but both of these occur in deserted places in Galilee. Finally, there is the raising of Lazarus from the dead in the little village of Bethany. So, yes, they did see someone who worked some miracles but only a few. And, remember: they also heard this same "miracle-worker" say in frustration on the occasion of one of his miracles: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe" (John 4:48 RSV).

No, very quickly they realized that he was much more than either a rabbi or a miracle worker. Much more. In fact, shortly after they came and saw, one of them, Andrew, was so excited by what he saw that he immediately ran and called Simon, his brother, and said 'This isn't just any man; this is the Messiah himself!' In other words, this is the one that all Israel has been expecting, the Son of David, who will free us and make Israel the greatest of all the nations on the earth.

Perhaps but as we shall see, Jesus will radically -- from the root up! -- alter the expectations of what it means to be the Messiah.

No, another disciple, named Nathanael, got it better. On his way to Galilee, now with Andrew, Simon -- whom Jesus renamed *Keifas*, a somewhat ominous name given similarity to the name of the High Priest of that day --, and the unnamed disciple, Jesus found Philip and told him to follow him. Philip did, but he also went and found Nathanael. When Nathanael said to him: 'Why do you want me to follow this Jesus from Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' do you remember what Philip responded: "Come and see" (John 1:45-46), the second time that we have heard this phrase in the Gospel. And, like

faithful John's two disciples, Nathanael, a faithful Israelite, according to Jesus (John 1:47), did come and did see. And what he saw convinced him that Jesus was not simply a rabbi, not simply a miracle-worker, not even the next political messiah, but actually the "son of God" (John 1:49).

That's what these first followers of Jesus came and saw, or at least began to see, namely, that this Jesus was somehow God's own son, the perfect image of the Father.

It took them awhile to realize that this was so. Even after 3 years that same Philip, who had found Nathanael, will still say to Jesus: "show us the Father and we will be satisfied", to which Jesus will respond: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9 RSV).

But slowly, slowly the truth began to dawn on them, a truth which perhaps also slowly begins at some point to dawn on us, a profound realization that would shake them to the core: 'This is not just a teacher; this is not just a great worker of miracles; this is not even just the great king that we have expected for centuries... this is someone we never expected in our midst, this is God Himself.'

Slowly, it began to dawn on them that this was the one in whom all life had begun to exist. The Gospel says: "In him was life". They began to see this because he was enabling them to see it. As the Gospel goes on to say: "In him was life, and that life was the light of all people".

Has it dawned on you?

They had thought that they were simply going to see the house where he was staying, perhaps the bed where he slept, the desk where he worked, the books on this rabbi's library shelf. But what they saw, or at least began to see, was that while he did have resting places, he had no real home, that nowhere in this world was his home to be found. As he says of himself in another Gospel: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58 RSV).

And they began to see something that they couldn't fully understand, any more than we can today. The Son does have a true home. His home, where he truly abides, is the one place that he will never leave according to the gospel of John, the bosom of the Father. They began to see what every reader of John's Gospel knows from that great hymn that opens John's Gospel, a hymn that is read to us every Christmas, a hymn which begins "In the beginning was the Word..." and which ends "No one has ever seen God. The only begotten Son, who is always in the bosom of the Father, that one has made God known" (John 1:18 LGB).

What did they come and see? They came and saw, or at least began to see, that Jesus is the Son of God, who lives as close to the heart of the Father as is possible, because He is the very Son of God Himself.

But, third and finally, and you might say, somewhat anticlimactically after that resounding vision: why? Why does the Evangelist present us with this elaborate process of coming and seeing? Why not just tell us straight out?

The process of coming and seeing is really the process of learning or discipleship, because that, after all, is what Christian discipleship is all about: coming to Jesus and seeing who he really is. But, as is clear from

John's Gospel, while it is very clear who this Jesus is, it was clearly not clear to those who encountered him, even those who faithfully followed him. And so it is necessary not only for John to announce who he is – the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, even God's son – but also to wean even these faithful Israelites, even guileless Israelites like Nathanael, from false expectations.

What were some of these false expectations? Well, we have already seen the expectations that the two followers of John had of Jesus when they asked to see where he was staying: rabbi, miracle-worker, perhaps even the long-expected Messiah.

But, why were these expectations false?

Many in Israel expected that the Laws given by Moses, and actualized by the prophets, and reflected on by the wise men of Israel would be adequate not just now, but for all eternity. The Pharisees had led the people to believe that all that they needed were scholars – like themselves – capable of plumbing the depths of Scripture to pull out old truths and make them relevant for us now. So, they thought that what God would always faithfully provide would be teachers, that is, rabbis, who would instruct His people in the way that they should walk. That's what is needed, and that's really all that is needed.

This is not so different from people today, who, as Pastor Paul has often reminded us, seem to think that all that we need is that next great moral or philosophical guru or teacher who can provide us with the silver-bullet best-seller that will teach us how to live happily in this world. So, Israel, so the world, and, so, too often also, the Church: all we need is Scripture and faithful teachers who will teach us from it.

Jesus weans faithful Israelites from thinking that that is sufficient by showing how even the best teachers, like Nicodemus (John 3), get it wrong because when God Himself does appear, they don't see Him and they don't get it. The errors of even the best Biblical scholarship today, who also miss seeing God, should caution us against thinking that somehow even the best Biblical interpretation alone is adequate. Unless the Scriptures are opened by the Word Himself, in the power of the Spirit, they, the Word of God written, will offer readers with clues as to what they are about, but will never be adequate to lead to life itself, who is, as John's Gospel knows, the Word Himself.

Others, suffering the ravages of sickness, hunger, oppression, malice, naturally thought that God would intervene by means of a miracle worker to save them from their individual and collective ills. Surely when God's Kingdom comes, they thought, the words of Isaiah will be fulfilled and God will heal us from our illnesses and the ravages of time.

But at least as depicted in the Gospel of John, neither Israel's aches and pains and sufferings, nor even the aches and pains of every individual whom Jesus encountered, suggest that this is what God is ultimately interested in. Not surprisingly, even today, many Christians are scandalized by Jesus' lack of pastoral care skills as reflected in the Gospel of John (cf. John 11:6, 14-15). And this is so, even though they themselves know practically that not every believer who prays for freedom from her sufferings is healed.

No, Jesus also weans those who want to come and see because they believe that God is primarily interested in the diagnosis and remedy of their particular problems.

Finally, others expected God to provide the perfect political leader to raise the people of God above all the other peoples of the planet. Whether it be the Messiah, Son of David, riding into Jerusalem to defeat the hordes of Gentiles, or the Christian expectation of a leader who would defeat the hordes of Arabs or

Mongols under the sign of the cross, such an expectation again and again is shown to be a dangerously false temptation, one that ignores Jesus words to the Roman judge Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36 LGB).

No, Jesus slowly disabused all who came in contact with him of false gospels, all of which address problems that are less than the real problem, and which are thus pseudo-problems.

And then he sets before them – and us! – the problem that he had in fact come to address, the very thing that he did want faithful witnesses to “come and see”. And what was that?

That he had come to deal with death itself.

In fact, this whole elaborate weaning from something false to be able to come and see something true becomes clear when we consider the third and final use of the phrase “come and see” in John’s Gospel.

Do you remember where it occurs in John’s Gospel?

Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus, in fact, the only one in the Gospel of whom it is said “the one whom Jesus loved”, has died (John 11:3). When Jesus eventually got there, it had been four days since his death (11:17). Jesus came to the house of Lazarus’s sisters, Martha and Mary. There he found the sisters but also a whole crowd of fellow Jews, mourning, wailing, and weeping. Martha and Mary, who know Jesus, are upset and reproach Jesus for having taken so long to get there: ‘Rabbi, if you’d only been here before he died, all this would never have happened’ (11:21, 32). ‘Now it’s too late,’ she implies. ‘He’s been dead 4 days. His body is already decomposing’ (11:39). And she adds to confirm it: ‘You can smell his death even outside of the tomb.’

So, Jesus asks the sisters and the crowd: “Where have you placed the body?” (11:34a). As with one voice, the crowd over anxiously invites Jesus to see where dead Lazarus now lies decaying and rotting after 4 days, to the darkened tomb, as they say “Come and see” (11:34b).

“Come and see”

The same words that Jesus had said to the two disciples of John, when he invited them to come and begin see that He is the one who gave life to the world...

The same words that Philip had said to Nathanael, who came and began to see for himself that Jesus was indeed the very life-giving Son of God....

And now, the same words insinuated to Jesus by the mourning crowds, anxious to draw Jesus to the death-filled tomb. ‘Come and see, Jesus. Come and see the end of all things in this world.’

Come and see... and weep, which is exactly what Jesus does when he arrives at the tomb (John 11:35).

Can there be a more chilling reversal of this phrase?

Can there have been a more dramatic reversal of the invitation on Jesus’ part to come and witness life than an invitation now to come and witness death?

And, yes, Jesus wept. But let's be careful here.

Jesus did not weep, as the crowds thought, because of how much he loved Lazarus (11:36) or because he suddenly realized that he should have gotten there earlier to save Lazarus, his good friend, as is implied in the crowd's murmurings (11:37).

Nor did Jesus weep, as some scholars suggest, because he saw in the death of Lazarus a kind of foretaste of what he himself was going to experience. In John's Gospel there is no "dark night of the soul" in Gethsemane, when Jesus will weep before God asking for this cup to pass from him. In John's Gospel, Jesus will go to his arrest, trial, and even crucifixion fully in control.

Why did he weep?

Jesus wept to let those faithful – and faithless¹ – witnesses around him, who had come to see, know what God felt when He came face to face with what the good creation – which he had brought into being – had become. The Son of God, who is always in the bosom of the Father, and who from there brought all things that exist into being and created them good, came face to face not with God the Father with whom he is always face to face, but now also with the decaying and stinking world that creation had become, when sickness bears its flower, when age brings humans to a wretched end, when earthquakes shake the foundations and drag whole cities even nations down into the depths and close over them, when suns explode and take all life with them. This is not the creation of God. This is not what the Son of God brought into being, a world in which death, not life, is the air we all smell, a world in which death is both the beginning of the road and its end.

But, he had not come to mourn death, much less to fear death. The Son of God had come to conquer death. And so as a first-taste of what a redeemed creation is going to look like, the Son of God arose, and the Word spoke the word with all boldness: "Lazarus come forth" (11:43). And Lazarus – stinking, decaying, decomposing Lazarus – came forth from the tomb of death with the flesh of a new born child.

'Now this,' everyone must have said, 'you just have to come and see!' (cf. 12:9)

Why this process of discipleship? Why does the Evangelist narrate this extensive reflection on discipleship?

It is not just to show that the light came into the world.

It was not just to wean Israel from false expectations.

It was also to lead us to the point that Jesus will not simply deal with individual deaths, like that of Lazarus, one by one but that Jesus but to show us that Jesus was going to deal with death itself.

How?

He had begun to face death not at the raising of Lazarus, but rather at His incarnation, that is, when took on flesh.

He had given those who witnessed the events at Lazarus's tomb instruction on how the giver of life was moved by the "flesh" which is what His good creation had become.

But He would complete the instruction only when He put an end to death which reigns through the power of the flesh.

This is why this elaborate narrative. This is why this whole process of discipleship. It is to show faithful witnesses what God is truly like, how much He loves the creation that He has brought into being, what His reaction is when He comes face to face with what has become of His creation, and what He is going to do about it.

It is to enable faithful witnesses to see that the One who is, was, and always will be in the bosom of the Father yet took on himself not just manhood, but flesh. The Gospel of John declares: “The Word became ... not man but ... flesh”. “Flesh” is all that decays and dies. In His incarnation Jesus did not just take upon himself the experience of all men and women. He took upon Himself all decaying and stinking flesh, the whole experience of this distorted world, a world that is not at all what He had created.ⁱⁱ But He did not do so simply to experience it but to eliminate it. And so He would take it to the cross and in His death, death itself would die. Then, gloriously, 3 days later, He would rise from the dead the victor over death.

My friends, death has been defeated. And now the whole of creation groans because the whole of creation knows what is coming: its redemption. And so we say, ‘come, Lord Jesus and restore your creation’.

It is entirely appropriate for us to remember all of this at this time of the year.

We have just celebrated the feast of the Incarnation, otherwise known as Christmas. That second of the great feasts of Christianity is announced every year with the great hymn of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh... No one has ever seen God. His only begotten Son, who dwells always in His bosom, he has made him known” (John 1:1, 14, 18 LGB).

And now in the church season that we call Epiphany, in which we celebrate not only the appearance of a star to wise men from the East but also, as we prayed in our Collect for today, that God’s “Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world”, as Isaiah had written, it is right that we should come and see the light of the world.

But, like the first disciples of Jesus, we too are summoned to come and see that the light became flesh, and to be disabused of false expectations that we have, and to see in truth that He came in order to die and thus put an end to death, which reigned through the flesh. For this He, who is the author of all that is, has come, so that all that is, His whole of creation, may be restored and that His whole creation may have life and have it abundantly. For He is the lamb of God that takes away the world’s sin.

This is what the two disciples of John came and eventually saw, and why their apostolic witness and teaching matter.

In a moment our bishop is going to invite all those who have died with Christ in baptism and been raised with him to new life in the Spirit to come forward to receive the body and blood of our Lord, the lamb of God who takes away the world’s sin. He is going to invite us here at St. George’s to come and see so that

we may begin the next 125 years of ministry as the people of God who, having seen the light, shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, 'making Him known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth'.

But this morning I want also to invite those of you who may be asking, questioning, wanting to be made fully alive, you who have had enough of death and want life in all its abundance ...I want to invite you also to come and see. I want to invite you to come and kneel at this altar, too, and to tell one of the people serving communion that you don't know the life-giving Son of God but that you want to know Him, that you have come and that you want to see Jesus. They will direct you to the right people to pray with you. And those people will pray with you that God will give you eyes to see Him as the life-giving God who is faithful and, above all, good.

And now unto Him who is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before our father's throne, to Him be power and authority, majesty and dominion, now, henceforth, and forevermore. Amen.

ⁱ Rudolf Bultmann concludes that Jesus weeps at the faithlessness of the sisters and the crowd. R. K. Bultmann, The Gospel of John: A Commentary (ed. R. W. N. Hoare; trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 407.

ⁱⁱ The early church Fathers are unanimous in understanding John 11:35 ("Jesus wept") as implying evidence of Jesus' en-fleshment and that the Incarnation represents that his body has become liable to decay, manifested in water pouring forth from the body. See A. Corbeil, "Weeping Statues, Weeping Gods and Prodigies," Tears in the Graeco-Roman World (ed. T. Fögen; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009) 297–310.