

January 19, 2020

Psalm 40: 1-11

I Corinthians 1: 1-9

John 1: 29-42

No Body But Yours...
The Reverend Jay Sanderford

When members of my family introduce someone, they always give that person a spontaneous promotion. If she's a physician, they will embellish the story, introducing her as a brilliant neurologist. A teacher's aide soon achieves tenure as a full professor in a named chair. A successful entrepreneur becomes the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation. I am told that I do the same thing, even after forty years of being married to a wonderful woman who is a master of restraint and understatement. I artfully turn an ordinary athlete into the star of the US Women's National Soccer Team. When I'm talking about my Labrador retrievers, they rapidly are transformed from loyal, playful pets into champions of the Westminster Kennel Club.¹

In my family, we see life as a series of grand stories that cry out to be filled with impressive characters, each one more over-drawn than the first. My grandfather started it; he was a larger-than-life textile manufacturer, community leader and a gifted story-teller. He had an uncanny ability to recall people's names, even after the most fleeting, sketchy introductions. His world was chockfull, then, with a cast of the most popular, powerful, eccentric and yet magnificent characters in the state of North Carolina. The problem is that we can get it all wrong, and lose the kernel of who a person really is. For instance, when a Teamsters' local labor union organizer is announced as the vice-president of a textile company's labor relations division, he has switched sides. If I refer to a friend as a perfect mother, she loses the freedom to scream and tear her hair out when her infant child flings strawberry yogurt across the breakfast room for a new wallpaper. In our magnificent descriptions, though generously presented, we may actually strip our characters of the capacity to be who they really are as well as the freedom to be the person who God formed them to be.

John's gospel tells us that when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming, he nearly shouted aloud, "*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29).

Talk about a magnificent introduction! I wonder what Jesus felt in that moment? Did he want to demure and deflect in typical mid-western style, "*Ah gee, gosh, that's not me.*"? Or just to stand up and say directly, "*Stop. I'm not all that.*" "*No way*"? Or was he happy with the introduction? I have to say, those are some heavy

¹ Daniel, Lillian, [Grand Introductions](#), The Christian Century, January 2, 2002. I am grateful for this essay by L. Daniel for it inspired me to re-examine my own family's love of story-telling and of outsized characters.

expectations, to be the Lamb of God, to be God's representative, en-fleshed holiness and mystery, incarnate of God and all humanity.

Remember, in this Gospel John the Baptist doesn't know Jesus yet. He has to wait for him to be revealed in baptism. And so he baptizes every person who comes to the Jordan, one at a time. Can't you picture him standing there, waist-deep in the water, looking into each person's eyes just before he baptizes, searching for some glimmer of divinity, and then, when they come sputtering up out of the water, looking toward heaven to see if this will be the one on whom the Spirit descends and remains?

How do we know? How do we know that this is God, the one we are searching for? How on earth does John know that this is Jesus, the one sent from God?

I wonder, but I imagine that finding Jesus must have been a little bit like panning for gold. Have you stood there in a mountain stream, with cold, muddy water flowing down and you're there, midstream, holding a large metal pan? It works like this: you scoop up a pan full of water, sand and gravel from the creek bed and patiently swirl it around and around and around, slowly sloshing out the sand and gravel and water. And hoping that the heavier gold will settle in the tailings at the bottom. On a good day, you might actually see some flecks of gold in your pan, but what you really hope for is a nugget the size of a golf ball. When John finds Jesus it's like he's scooped up a nugget the size of a basketball. He struggles to get it out of the water, gasping and shouting, *"This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* When he tells the story later he says, *"I saw it with my own eyes! I saw the Spirit descend and remain on him! I'm telling you, this is the Son of God!"*

Yet, in today's story the focus is not really on Jesus, but on how others introduce Jesus. Here Jesus says extraordinarily little. In contrast, the introductions of Jesus to the world are so gigantic, with descriptions of doves, voices from heaven, splashy baptisms and anointing by the Holy Spirit, what more can Jesus say?

You can't help but recall the customary quip from every tribute dinner: *"Thank you, thank you, for that generous introduction. If only my parents could have been here to hear it."* In Jesus' case, God the Creator, God his Father had created the whole plan before time began. *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"* (John 1:1). Again, what a magnificent introduction!

In the Old Testament world, the Psalmist does not wait off-stage for an introduction. In one of my favorites, Psalm 40, the Psalmist is caught in a quagmire of foul politics, personal vendettas, private anguish and toxic national struggles, but refuses to be defined by the greasy surrounding world. The poet won't be named by his detractors. He is defined by his purpose, and it is not easy to tell the story of God to the world: *"I have told the glad news of deliverance . . . I have not restrained my lips. . . I have not hidden your saving help within my heart. . . I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation, [Lord]. . . I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation"* of peoples. (Psalm 40:6-10) The Psalmist has been called into an identity in which he may not be adored and accepted by anyone other than God, yet is introduced as an exemplar of great faith.

The world floods in on all of us. The world can be kind, and it can be punishing. It can be beautiful, and it can be atrocious. It can give us good reason to hope and every reason to give up all hope. It can strengthen our faith in a loving God, and it can demolish our faith. In our lives in the world, the temptation is always to go where the world takes *us*, to drift with whatever current happens to be running strongest. When good things happen, we rise to heaven; when bad things occur, we descend to hell. When the world strikes out at *us*, we in anger strike back, and when one way or another the world blesses *us*, our spirits soar.

These brilliant poems distill the essence of our existence before God. Down-to-earth and real, they don't gloss over the reality of our life. They dwell deeply in life, our lives, taking seriously the raw energy of agony and ecstasy. Moving from the heights to the depths of our human experience, we meet a God that is willing, compassionate and resourceful. A God who embraces us, totally, in good times, and in bad. In Psalm 40, first we hear,

*[God] leaned down to me; {God} listened to my cry for help,
and] lifted me out of the pit of death, out of the mud and filth,
and set my feet on solid rock. [God]
steadied my legs. (Psalm 4:1-2, Common English Bible)*

Imagine with me that you are at a party of some sort; it could be purely social, or a work function. You know how the script unfolds. "And so.....tell me what do you do?" we ask one another at a party or at an ordinary meet-and-greet. In response, we are presented with a litany of successes, or perhaps a résumé. But from time to time we are surprised by the honest narrative of an unhappy, wrecked life. When that happens, we raise our eyebrows, and quickly move to another guest, one who follows the conventions and says, "I work for the University as an administrator in the department of 'such and such.' And you? Tell me who you are."

What if we demanded more of one another in our introductions? What if we skipped conventional social etiquette and moved instead to God's? So imagine if the other guest responds, "I work for the University as a research grant administrator, but who I really am is a creature that God knit together in my mother's womb. My family wants me to get an M.B.A, but sometimes I wonder if I'm an arrow God hid away in a quiver, and I'm about to be shot out into this broken and needy world to do something massive and audacious for our community. The world tells me I don't make enough money to pay my monthly VISA bill, but my faith tells me I could be a light to the nations."² Introductions, it seems, lead to invitations, and invitations lead to service.

Imagine, too, that the Apostle Paul ambles over from the dessert table and says nonchalantly, "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation, and I know precisely what you mean." I truly believe God "is right alongside you to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of Jesus, his Son. {God} will never give up on you. Never forget that" (I Corinthians 1:8-9, *The Message*). The two of us acknowledge the insight: "I'm thinking that our cause is definitely with God," says the research manager with a grin. The party swirls around them, but she has been caught up in something holy and new and life-giving.

So Jesus hears John introduce him again. This time John is standing with two men who will turn out to be the first disciples, and John announces, "Look, here is the Lamb of God" (John 1:35). That's enough to make the men follow him, but Jesus seems to want to clarify. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to

² Ibid.

them, *“What are you looking for?”* They followed up with a different question: *“where are you staying?”* He invited them to *“Come and see”* (John 1:35-39).

It is Jesus’ first question, too, the one he asks the disciples, when he notices they are surreptitiously following him. *“What are you looking for?”* (John 1:38) And it is precisely the order of the exchange that haunts me. The disciples aren’t really interested in the question they ask so publicly. Instead, they are really looking for a whole new way of life. They want to know more. Something is shifting at the core of their world. The men are asking, *“Where and how and with whom are you aligned? What will home look like if we hang out with you? What’s our final destination as your potential followers? Tell us up front what we need to know so that we can pin you down, locate you, and understand you.”*

“Come and see” (John 1:39), Jesus says, as if to suggest that we do know one another not by titles or names or resumes but ultimately by how we live. How ordinary. Jesus has gone from being the Lamb of God to a guy having a bunch of other guys from work over to his place to watch the hockey game. And in the process their lives have been changed, transformed, and they are soon out bearing witness to everything that has happened.

What is Jesus’s response to this flurry of questions? A maddening one, concrete and elusive at the same time. *“Come and see.”* Which is to say: we have to follow Jesus all the way home if we want to know where he is and what he’s about. He won’t be pinned down. He won’t fit into any box we try to stick him in. He’s not the type who remains still — he moves. At times, he will not be easy to seek or find. In short: the path that leads to him will become clear only when we decide to walk it. Hence the question we must ask ourselves at every turn: what are we looking for? Jesus? Or something else?

Looking. Seeing. Finding. Doing. These are the things we are called to do, not once, but over and over again as Christians. This is the heart of discipleship – not to hasten the end our search, but to pursue it ever more deeply and intentionally. To cultivate a willingness to look. A willingness to see and be seen. A willingness to tell the truth about what we have found. A willingness to venture forth again, even when we don’t know where “home” is. A willingness to do the work of compassion, justice and mercy.

The invitation to “come and see” is an invitation to leave our comfortable vantage points, and dare to believe that just maybe, we have been limited and wrong in our certainties about each other, about God, and about the world. To “come and see” is to approach all of life with a grace-filled curiosity, to believe that we are holy mysteries to each other, worthy of further exploration. To come and see is to enter into the joy of being alive.

As we all know, there is more to life than mere introductions. Jesus knows this and as he names and renames these fresh new disciples. He equips and strengthens them for the next phase, the upcoming challenge that will take them all out beyond introductions to action. What has been “come and see, is now changed into “go and do.” A poem attributed to St. Teresa de Avila, a sixteenth century Spanish mystic, shapes our new reality:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.³*

³ Avila, Teresa. “Christ Has No Body,” from “Journey with Jesus,” posted June 30, 2019. Poem attributed to St. Teresa de Avila <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/692-teresa-of-avila-christ-has-no-body>

Said to have been enclosed in a letter to her convent full of nuns, this fragment of poetry neatly reflects an incarnational theology, the idea that we are to be Jesus Christ to the world. It's the idea that we are to, within our very human limits, to try and embody God's great love for the world in our lives.

This fragmentary idea rests at the core of one of our next great adventures in the life of this church, and that is to discover anew where God is pointing us in our community and world. So much has been accomplished over so many great years in our ministries to Haiti, to Peru, to Nicaragua, to the Philippines, to Russia and to Israel and Palestine. Now something audacious is happening in our local ministries on multiple fronts. People are being fed, sheltered, and clothed. Vulnerable neighbors have access to health care. Inventive ministries are springing up month by month. Volunteers have spent long nights the last two weeks with our guests in the Rotating Shelter. Perhaps, this is our next calling, to be a place of shelter, justice and mercy for our community, and yes, for the world.

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