

SEEING IS BELIEVING?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 20, 2008

Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

There is an old saying that seeing is believing. But we all know that that isn't true.

Iran's President Amadinijab, like all the rest of us has seen the pictures and film footage of the holocaust, but he says it never happened. Some people believe that Americans have never set foot on the moon; that the whole lunar landing was telecast from a Hollywood set and the white boots of Neil Armstrong never touched lunar dust. There is a story going around these days, documented with engineering studies, and dotted with political intrigue, which argues that the World Trade Center was wired with bombs eleven hours before the attack on September 11th, 2001. "Men in black raincoats did it," a friend of mine said straight faced and earnest two weeks ago. It was a plot hatched by the Vice-President," she said. "Two students at Oneonta State have proven it. They have a website."

No particular admirer of the Vice-President myself, I nonetheless sat there slack jawed and bewildered that a friend could be so deceived and deluded by such a ridiculous theory.

Seeing helps. And being there helps even more. Though not everything we see or experience is necessarily what it seems.

There's a bit of that at play in the text today from John's gospel a dynamic piece in which way too much happens in the short span of a few verses.

John the Baptist whom we left just before Christmas out in the wilderness savoring locusts dipped in wild honey has, by this time, come under investigation by the priests and Levites of Jerusalem. They ask a civil question, "Are you the messiah?" And he answers, "I am not the messiah."

In the following days, as John sees Jesus repeatedly, he tells his disciples, "Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." And again, "This man is the Son of God."¹ Mighty strong character references!

So, two of John's disciples, taking John at his word, decide to investigate the claim. They start trailing Jesus to see what they can see. And Jesus, after awhile wonders why these two are tagging along after him. At some point it is enough. Jesus turns on his heels, looks at Andrew and the other disciple and asks, "What are you *looking for?*"

Now that's a great question on the face of it. Don't you think? *What are you looking for?* That'll preach!

Just about everybody here is looking for something, and I don't just mean your glasses or your apartment keys, though more and more that is precisely that for which I spend a lot of time looking. If you're under forty, you're probably looking for yourself, trying to understand who you are, and what you're doing here in this life, in this city, at this point in your years. If you're married you're probably looking at your relationship,

how to make things better, more enduring, more peaceful, more intimate. If you're a parent, you're probably looking for the operating instructions that should have been included on arrival but weren't. The one that tells you how to be a parent in the first place, and not mess it up the way your parents did.

If you're divorcing, you may be asking what went wrong, looking at where you go from here, how you put your life back together again, and how do you keep from repeating the same problems with yourself, with another; and should you even try?

If you're single you may be looking for someone with whom to share your life, your future, your dreams... to help you see more to life than the same old take-out food every night, the same old rat race at work, the exhaustion that sets in when all you do is take care of others, and take too little care of yourself.

"What are you looking for?" Jesus asked Andrew and the other disciple who trailed him.

The logical thing for them to say would have been, "We're disciples of John and he says you're the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Son of God. We've come to see whether it's so." That's what you'd think they'd say. But instead, Andrew and the other disciple answer Jesus with a question, "Rabbi, where are you staying?"

And I think that's a strange thing to ask at this point. Here they were meeting for the first time, these two fellows trailing him, and Jesus asks them, "What are you looking for?" And these two fellows ask Jesus, "Where are you staying?" What kind of question is that? And what kind of answer?

Let me warn you that there is more going on here than meets the eye or ear. There is text and there is subtext. There is what meets the eye and ear, and there is something more that does not. The abundance of weighty titles like Lamb of God, and Rabbi, and Messiah, even Son of God in the text all tip us off to the fact that what's under discussion is very important. John has laid layer upon layer of meaning on this exchange. Much of what he wants to tell us in the whole gospel is embedded right here.

Andrew asks, "Where are you staying?"

And Jesus says, "Come and see." It's a phrase that we will hear throughout the gospel. "Come and see."

Philip goes to Nathaniel and announces that he has met the messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, to which Nathaniel says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And Philip says, "Come and see."

When Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well one day, he talks to her seriously about her life, her five marriages, her live-in boyfriend, and about her faith, and when she leaves him, she runs around town and invites everybody to "*Come and see* a man who told me everything I have ever done. Can he be the Messiah?"

And then when Lazarus died, Jesus went to his home and Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, told him that their brother was dead, and Jesus asked where they had laid his body, to which the crowd said, "Come and see." And when Jesus went and saw, he wept and he raised Lazarus from the dead, the greatest of all his signs and wonders, save the sign and wonder of his own death and resurrection.

The gospel of John is a gospel that invites us to *come and see* the life of Jesus, his mighty acts and deeds, and ponder their meaning for our lives and for our world.

That invitation that he extends to *come and see* is the answer that Jesus gives to the question that Andrew asks of him, “Where are you staying?” “Where are you staying?” Andrew asks. An odd question. To which Jesus answers, “Come and see.”

The word that is translated here as *staying* is the same word that Jesus uses elsewhere in the gospel when he speaks of *abiding*. “*Abide* in me and I will *abide* in you,” he promises. “Those who abide in me, and I in them will bear much fruit,” he says.

Among his last words at the Passover meal the night of his arrest, are, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.”

If John’s gospel is a story about what happens when you come and see the life of Jesus, it is also a story about where it is that the journey will take you. It will take you to his abiding place... where God dwells and God’s people gather together in his name. “In my Father’s house are many mansions,” Jesus says elsewhere in John’s gospel, and the word in the plural translated “mansions” in the King James is more correctly if less poetically rendered as “abiding places.”

Oh, one other little note from the text I should mention. When Jesus invited the two disciples to come and see where he was abiding, they followed him and remained with him that day, and John notes it was about 4:00 o’clock in the afternoon.

Which is a kind of funny thing to notice; what time it is! Except if you understand the meaning of what happens at 4:00 in the afternoon in the early church, in John’s church.

4:00 o’clock in the afternoon, you see, was when John’s church gathered for worship, when they broke bread, and shared the cup, and they knew then that Christ was abiding with them, and they with him.

No church can ever claim exclusive rights as Christ’s sole abiding place. As if Jesus could be limited to the First Presbyterian Church on Twelfth Street and Fifth Avenue, or to Ascension, a block down the street, or to St. Pat’s up on 51st, or to Abyssinian Baptist in Harlem. He no doubt abides in all those places.

Nor is it to say that he cannot be known in the beauty of the creation, and the glory of the heavens, and the intricate wonder of a finger print etched on an infant’s hand. It’s rather that Jesus promises that when we do gather here or wherever we gather in his name, and we break bread and share the cup, he abides with us, and we with him. Someone has said that the rhythm of the church is simply this, gather the people, tell the story, break the bread.

John remembers that when the disciples gathered and broke bread and prayed and sang and worshipped, and shared fellowship and ate together, and went out to serve the needs of those who were poor, the widow, the homeless, the hungry, the fearful, those who were alone, when they gathered at St. John’s church to do that, at 4:00 o’clock, they knew Jesus would be there abiding with them.

This is good news for the church, for our church, for every church, I think. The idea that when we gather Christ is present among us, abiding with us. Because sometimes Jesus is so obscured in the church.

I look at the church sometimes, Christ's church, not necessarily First Church, and wonder if anybody comes and sees what is going on, whether they can see Christ abiding there. Episcopalians and Presbyterians and Methodists all wound up about ordination issues. Southern Baptists running the finest and most respected of their faculties out of their seminaries in a purge of theological intolerance. The Roman Catholic Church plagued by clergy who have not kept their vows of celibacy.

Children disdained in some congregations by adults because the children wiggle and squirm and ask questions out loud and get bored and cry, like we all once did, like we all still do sometimes, if the truth be known. It takes time to learn how to *BE* in church and abide there with one another, even the youngest of us. We have in our baptismal promises as Presbyterians pledged our support of those parents who are teaching their children how to abide with us, in Christ, and us with them, for of such as these children, Jesus said, is the kingdom of heaven.

Over the years I have seen a lot of things in the church that must give Jesus a headache if not heart burn or maybe even break his heart, abiding with us in the way he does, all the time, except perhaps when we drive him out with a spirit of discord.

Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace* writes about the imperfect vessel that the church is. Writing of her own congregation in North Dakota she says,

We are not individuals who have come together because we are like-minded. ... We are like most healthy churches, I think, in that we can do pretty well when it comes to loving and serving God, each other and the world; but God help us if we have to agree about things. I could test our "uniformity" by suggesting a major remodeling of the sanctuary, or worse, that Holy of Holies – the church kitchen. But I value my life too much.

She goes on,

The church is like the Incarnation itself, a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That's why it is called the body of Christ.

And that is why when the battles rage, people hold on. They find a sufficient unity, and a rubbed raw but sufficient love, and even the presence of God.²

What are you looking for? It's finally not the church that we come seeking, but the Christ who abides here. And every now and then we see him, if only briefly, in of all places, one another, exactly as he promised.

Lisa Larges is a member of Noe Valley Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. This week, under the new rules of the denomination approved at the last General

Assembly, Lisa Larges, 44 years old, and a candidate for ministry was examined by the Presbytery of San Francisco to determine whether she was ready to proceed to ordination upon receipt of a call.

Lisa has been a candidate preparing for ordination for a long time, twenty two years in fact. Maybe the longest candidacy process in Presbyterian history, I don't know. But because of the new rules of the Presbyterian Church, Lisa was able to request that she be permitted to depart from the standard of the church regarding sexual orientation. You see, Lisa is lesbian and has been in a committed relationship in recent years. After three hours of debate in closed session, the Presbytery of San Francisco voted on Tuesday to sustain her examination by a vote of 167 in favor and 151 opposed.

It was precisely what the General Assembly of the church intended, that candidates be evaluated not on their sexual orientation but on the basis of their gifts for ministry, and readiness to serve, and clarity of call, and academic credentials, and yes their character.

I put it to you that in my understanding of justice, the church this week, in San Francisco was one of those places where the abiding presence of Christ could be seen.

Oh, I should also mention, that Lisa Larges is blind. Which proves that even in the dark you can see and feel Jesus with you, when his abiding presence is there.

In the final analysis, it is not always possible to see Christ present either in the world, or in the actions of the church. Which is, I suppose why at the end of John's gospel, Jesus says to Thomas, the doubting disciple, "You believe because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.

And maybe that's what we hang onto when we cannot see Jesus clearly, that even beyond what we see with our eyes, or hear with our ears, we still can know him present by faith and in our hearts when he abides with us, and we with him.

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¹ My own paraphrase of John 1:26-31 based on the NRSV.

² Kathleen Norris, **Amazing Grace**. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998. 272-273.