



Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 17, 2021

Prelude:

Prelude on A Welsh Tune

Gordon Young

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

Arise, people of God! The light has come; it shines around us, within us, and without us.

In the gloom of winter we seek out the light of Christ; we yearn for God's radiance and warmth.

Gather, people of God! Come to encounter the Holy Mystery of God-with-us. As the wise men journeyed from afar, so have we come to pay homage to the Christ child.

Give thanks, people of God! Let us be servants of the gospel, sharers in the promise of Christ.

Through Christ, we have access to God; let us be bold in our worship!

Opening Hymn: "Christ You Offer Us Your Welcome" *sung to Beach Spring*

Christ, you offer us your welcome; it's a precious gift you give!

You bring reconciliation and you show us how to live.

You call poor ones from their sadness, you call rich ones from their pride.

You call people who are outcast, telling all to "Come inside!"

In a world that's often fearful, where so many stand alone,
you invite us to your table and you welcome people home.

Then you point us to the strangers that, it seems, nobody sees,
and you say, "These are your neighbors. I am here, in each of these."

You have given us a mission— to invite our neighbors in—
and your call to love and listen is a place we can begin.

We need more than open houses; we need, first, to give our hearts.

By your Spirit, make us servants; that's the way your welcome starts.

May we set a welcome table, may we find a common ground
where no one will feel they're labeled, where acceptance can be found.

We don't need to entertain there, or to do things that impress—
just to hear folks' joy and pain there, and to love so all are blest.

Christ, your call to offer welcome is an urgent, mighty call;
you have given us a vision of your Way that welcomes all.

May we seek to meet our neighbors in their vast diversity.

As your loved and welcomed people, may we build community.

A Time of Prayer:

O God of the darkened sky and chilly dawn, God of the blanket of snow and the icy pond, God at all seasons, teach us your truths in these short days and long nights. Teach us the lessons of waiting. Like seeds and bulbs lying hidden, may we nurture the silences and trust in your wisdom hidden in the stillness.

Teach us the lessons of expectancy, of opening our eyes to see everyday wonders: the gurgle of a baby, the letter from a forgotten friend, the twinkle of a light, the crunch of snow.

God of all seasons, we celebrate this day with you. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

John 1:43-51 (NIV)

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' 46 Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' 48 Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' 49 Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' 50 Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' 51 And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

Musical Interlude:

Tale

Flor Peeters

The Message:

“Come and See”

Have you ever heard that old adage, “Seeing is believing”? Since Covid-19 began last spring so many things have changed including the ways that we buy things.

The statement of “Seeing is believing” is just one of the bedrocks upon which the advertising world rests.

For instance, a salesperson at the Godzilla Hawg Shop can talk to you about the 2021 Kawasaki Z125 Pro until he's blue in the face. Won't matter much. You have to see it to believe it. You have to try it before you buy it.

“Won't hurt to take a look,” he says. And you look, and he tells you that “this baby's less than \$3,000, has a 37-inch seat height, only 225 pounds — a 125cc single-cylinder machine of aggressive style and raw power. Want to take it for a ride?” Of course you do.

Few people buy a house unseen. When house-hunting, we might tour several homes before signing the papers. It never hurts to take a look. And when we look at the amenities in the kitchen, the spacious en suite bathroom in the primary

bedroom, the cabinets in the two-car garage, we're sold.

But in a COVID culture, we're able order a lot of stuff online. What if we want to look at the product before buying it? If we go to a brick-and-mortar store, we can touch things, feel them, look at them, test them. E-commerce is iffy. All we have is a hope and a prayer.

Until recently. Many e-tailers now allow us to "try and buy." We select the items on the website, then choose "pay later" at checkout. After checkout, the order ships. An email confirmation then informs us when payment is due. Once we receive our items, we're able to log on and pay for the items we wish to keep. If an item doesn't fit or work out, it is returned.

Before we buy in, we need to get in. Before committing, we need to experience. We want to look, we want to touch and we want to see.

This is precisely what the apostle John says happened in the relationship the disciples had with Jesus. They looked, they touched and they saw. This matter of looking, or taking a look, is at the heart of today's gospel reading. The expression "Come and see" is mentioned twice, once by Jesus and once by Andrew. Later, Jesus will say simply, "Follow me," and at the end of Matthew's gospel, he simply says, "Go ..." There's no "come." There's no seeing involved. The seeing part is over. Now, it's "Go ... into all the world." Let's return to this later. For now, we have to remember that "try and buy" is at the heart of our faith.

You might imagine a conversation in the Trinity of the Godhead. The point is made that providing the Law has not worked. Sending the prophets has not worked. "These mortals need to see us in the flesh! Nothing else will work."

The Incarnation is — understood in this way — simply a divine surrender to the axiom that "seeing is believing." So, God decides that being robed in fleshly form is not only a good thing, but an absolute necessity. People need to be able to see and touch the Divine. And so they do. Even the author of this gospel reports in 1 John that those who were with Jesus saw and believed: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-3).

"And oh, did I mention that we saw, heard, touched and looked at Jesus Christ, the Son of God? LOL," he might have added if he was texting today.

Our faith rests in part on the idea that even the Godhead believed that for the great plan of salvation to work, humans needed to see God in the flesh and in action.

Now, this God-in-the-flesh whose name is Jesus ("for he will save his people from their sins," Matthew 1:21) is beginning his ministry. He's been living, we assume, with his parents for 30 years. But the time has come. He visits his cousin John, the charismatic, somewhat eccentric prophet living in the below-sea-level area of the Dead Sea. Jesus is baptized by him in the Jordan River. Jesus then heads for the hills in the desiccated Judean wilderness, where he prays and studies Scripture and has a harrowing encounter with the Prince of Darkness himself.

But, surviving this, he is now back on familiar turf in his own neighborhood,

putting together a crew for what would be an incredible three-year adventure. The first two members of the cohort, according to John's gospel, are Andrew and probably John himself, and they start to follow Jesus without being invited to do so. Their master/teacher had been John the Baptist, and when he identified Jesus as the "Lamb of God" (v. 36), the two of them left the strange-looking prophet and started to follow Jesus. When Jesus noticed them hanging around, he engaged them in conversation. They asked Jesus where he was staying, and he said, "Come and see" (v. 9). Try and buy.

Then, in our reading, Philip, who was invited to follow Jesus by Jesus himself, runs into Nathanael (also called Bartholomew) and says in so many words that he has found the Messiah. Nathanael, like the future disciple Thomas, is initially skeptical. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (v. 46). So Philip says, "Come and see."

This invitation is a simple template for evangelism. It was a part of Jesus' initial recruitment of disciples. As such, it is not a bad idea to emulate the formula that he used. There are two action verbs in this three-word invitation: "come" and "see."

Usually, we work out the "come" part by asking our friends and neighbors to come to church. This is not a bad thing. But what is it that they "see" at church? They see a lot of other Christians. They may see a worship band up front singing songs they've never heard before and that are difficult to sing. Or they have a book in their hands with songs that were written 200 years ago. It's all very strange. This is what they "see."

Jesus' invitation to Philip and Nathanael was not to visit a house of faith, but a house of friends. As a template for evangelism, the invitation to our friends and neighbors might better be an invite to "come over to our house," where they will be able to "see" us as real people, not actors. They might see us (who are believers, Christians, disciples and followers of Jesus) in our natural environment, just being who we are: Real, authentic, caring, loving people who follow Jesus.

Basically, we're saying to others, "Try and buy!"

Still, inviting people to go with us to church is not a bad idea or a wrong idea. The thing is, God is an inviting God. God is always inviting us to be in fellowship. Extending invitations is a very God-like thing to do. It's what God does. Therefore, the "invitational model" is one we should copy.

But if we ask someone to come, we'd better make sure there's something to see, and that they don't see the wrong things.

There's a dominant gene in Jesus' hypostatic DNA combination of divine and human nature .-. one that is touchy about the human need to see as a prerequisite for believing. Jesus clearly gets impatient about this very human tendency. Yet, it's who we are. We need to try before we buy.

Although Jesus invites Philip and Nathanael to see before buying in ("Come and see"), he doesn't seem happy about it in this reading. When Nathanael wonders aloud how in the world Jesus knows him (like, "Have we met before?"), Jesus says something about seeing him under a fig tree at a certain time on a certain day. Nathanael is rightly impressed. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (v. 49). But Jesus says, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?" (v. 49). Perhaps this impression that Jesus

always seems grumpy about the seeing/believing dialectic is one that is overlaid on the text because of Jesus' famous interaction with the disciple Thomas recorded toward the end of John's gospel.

There's always this tension. Jesus understands that humans need to see in order to believe. He just doesn't like it. He would prefer humans to believe in order to see, a sentiment echoed by Saint Anselm (1033-1109), who said (paraphrasing Augustine): "Credo ut intelligam," "I believe in order to understand."

If this were not true — that Jesus understood our need to see in order to believe — why, in the next chapter, would Jesus begin his ministry at a wedding party and transform water into wine? Think about it. Of all the possible ways that the Son of God could have announced his presence on earth among mortals, changing water to wine is his opening act? John writes, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (v. 11, emphasis added). They saw and then they believed. Jesus knew this about us from the get-go. He knew that the crowds often followed him just in case Jesus might perform a miracle in front of their very eyes. Miracles inspired or gave birth to faith. No question.

John even writes at the end of his gospel: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31, emphasis added).

Unfortunately, many of us have poor spiritual eyesight. It's not that God is not showing up; it's just that with the cataracts of daily obligations, distractions and general unease, we often miss the signs. We don't see God when God appears or when there is a sign of his presence. No wonder we sing, "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord ... I want to see You ..."

Jesus not only says "try and buy" ("come and see") in this reading, but he says (to Philip): "Follow me." In John's gospel, Philip is the first one to be invited and the first one to be on board with a verbal invite from the Lord himself.

At the end of John's gospel, Jesus invites the crew to have breakfast. "Come and dine," he says (21:12, KJV). But it's not a typical breakfast; it's a working breakfast. There's business to discuss. Jesus gets to work and starts passing out assignments. Perhaps some of the disciples already had their marching orders. But not Peter. And you know the rest.

So to what does Jesus invite us?

If we use John's gospel as a source, Jesus invites us:

to see where he lives.

to observe the signs and wonders he performs.

to stay and pray.

to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

to feed the flock (a life of service).

I must ask, have you ever encountered a situation like this one that I am about to describe?

You are in a grocery store doing some shopping and you run into someone you know. This is someone you respect and like and who you'd probably call a "friend." Well in his shopping cart, he has all manner of steaks, ribs, burgers, hot dogs, buns, and condiments, more than one family can eat in a single sitting. It's

rather clear and obvious that he's preparing for a big gathering. You remark about the contents of his cart and he says, "Yeah, I'm having a cookout tomorrow. Oh wait, you can come if you want!"

Now, what if, when he first started planning the cookout weeks ago, this friend had called you personally and invited you to his cookout? What if he had asked then if you had any dietary restrictions that might impact his shopping list? What if he'd had you in mind from the beginning?

In the first scenario, the invitation is passive and you are clearly an afterthought (perhaps not maliciously so, but an afterthought nonetheless). In the second scenario, the invitation is active. You are and have been part of the equation. There is intention behind the invitation, and that has been informed by your relationship to the friend.

When it comes to being an inclusive church, there is a difference between "you can come," and "you're invited!"

As a follower of Jesus Christ, let's accept the His invitation, an invitation to come, an invitation to take a look. What can it hurt, we've got nothing to lose. Let's stop what we're doing and think about what Jesus is inviting us to do, or to be. Perhaps we've been followers of Jesus for many years, but we've never really considered what — specifically — Jesus has invited us to do. It's possible we don't have a clue as to our role, our mission, our ministry.

Jesus says, "Come and see" — try and buy — and it's an invitation that could change our lives.

Musical Interlude:

Phrygian Prelude

Flor Peeters

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

Most gracious God: For your choice of one people among the world's peoples for the revealing of yourself and of your will for human life, we praise you. Through Moses, you gave your people the Law. Through your prophets, you charged them so to live by your Law that their lives might be a guiding light for all the nations.

In your own good time, O God, you moved to reveal yourself firsthand, fully, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We give you thanks for the cherished stories which surround his birth, particularly for the story of that bright and wondrous star that guided wise men from far away to his side. With them, we hail the light of your love, for your creation and for us, which shone from that little boy and would shine with dazzling radiance from the adult he grew up to be.

On this holy day, we praise you for expanding your circle of witnesses to include, beyond his people, all those who find in him the Light of the World; for creating, out of his sacrificial death and resurrection, a new people, a worldwide

community of his disciples, his ecumenical church. We pray for the church; for that strange, richly diverse company of women and men who have found in your divine Son a fresh start for human history and an unquenchable source of light.

Help us, O God, to let his light shine from us that we may be sources of light for others who stumble about in ignorance, anxiety, self-destructive passion, hatred or any other form of darkness. Grant that we may serve as messengers of your grace for loved ones and friends whose lives have been darkened by illness or who are at this very time walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

And now let us be the messengers of hope and light in a struggling world where people are searching for the Jesus who taught us pray with you and each other by saying these words..... "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

Closing Hymn: "How Shall They Hear the Word of God"

How shall they hear the word of God
unless his truth is told?
How shall the sinful be set free,
the sorrowful consoled?
To all who speak the truth today,
impart your Spirit, Lord, we pray.

How shall they call to God for help
unless they have believed?
How shall the poor be given hope,
the prisoner reprieved?
To those who help the blind to see,
give light and love and clarity.

How shall the gospel be proclaimed
that sinners may repent?
How shall the world find peace at last
if heralds are not sent?
So send us, Lord, for we rejoice
to speak of Christ with life and voice.

Benediction:

We are called to be witnesses to God's glory. God urges us, encourages us, pleads with us to take this call seriously — to live a life worthy of God. Jesus is our Model and Ideal, and also our Savior and Hope. When we fall short, it is the Spirit who supplies all our needs. Go from this place, committed to be witnesses to God, disciples of Christ and a community of the Spirit, through the power of the triune God. Amen.

Postlude:

Variation 3 from Variations on
All Hail the Power of Jesus Name

Peeters

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Maureen Daoust
Rebecca Driscoll
David Dufour
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
John Hanks, Jr.
Linda Hurd
Family of Mary Jackson
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Colin Lajoie
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier

Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Maria Piazza
Emma Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Diane Staples
Carter Stansel
Kaitlin Stansel
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Daniel Tousignant
Marilyn Wales
Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus

All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders

Our Governmental Leaders

Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571

Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein