

## COME AND SEE

### John 1:35-39

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 15, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

## SCRIPTURE

### *John 1:35-39*

*35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup>and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' <sup>37</sup>The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup>When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' <sup>39</sup>He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.*

## I.

On this weekend we as a nation remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a national leader worthy of an annual holiday. As Christians, we remember him as one of our own who challenged us and made the Gospel come alive in its link with the best ideals in our nation as expressed in our founding documents. He joins perhaps only Abraham Lincoln in so merging the Biblical language with the language of our founders. He called us to our best as both citizens and Christians. On this day, I want to reflect on where we are *as a nation* on racial matters, and where we might be in *our own faith*.

Last May, near the formal end of the Therefore Project, which we as a Session had developed in response to the killing of George Floyd two years earlier, I gave a short talk in the Haverkamp Room on what I had been reading over the two years since his death. I took questions at the end. The first question was: "At this point, are you feeling *optimistic* or *pessimistic* about race in our country?"

I said, "I don't know."

Then I added:

I would not say that my optimism or pessimism is particularly limited to race... I don't know that I would say my pessimism about our country is permanent... I hope it is not permanent. But I think that the division and confusion and the inability to find or hear, magnified, voices that seem to offer either something *reasonable* or something *hopeful*... something that *brings people together* – are hard to find.

But then I said:

I'm always encouraged [when I find] diversity of opinion within a range. I'm not talking about people way off on the wacky extremes. I'm talking about people who *engage one another*, and I do think there is good writing [and good voices, along these lines] ...and I don't have any reason to think that won't continue.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The full video of the presentation can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=405ZyqzVzd0&t=1606s>.

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About four months later, I was sitting in the family room of a couple in the church and one of them asked me, “Do you think our country is *closer* to solving our problems around race than we were two years ago?”

I paused a good while, and then I said: “I think the problem is so *long-standing* in our country that it will take years to overcome, and it is hard to judge progress *or* setbacks by such a short span of time as two years.”

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Then recently, I asked an African American member of our church what this person thinks may or may not have changed over the last two years. This member responded:

What I have noticed is that it is no longer taboo to talk about race – at work, in the neighborhood, at church. Race used to be like sex, politics, and religion: You couldn’t discuss it in polite company. But now you can.

And this member closed by saying, “I take heart from that.”

## II.

The lectionary passage for us today – from the Gospel of John – depicts the *first* words that Jesus speaks in that particular gospel. These words come into a very intense setting.

Jesus has been introduced to us by a beautiful Prologue:

In the beginning was the Word,  
And the Word was with God,  
And the World was God.<sup>2</sup>

But that Prologue<sup>3</sup> is immediately followed by a tense exchange between John the Baptist and religious authorities who are concerned about the Messiah John is proclaiming.<sup>4</sup>

“Who are you?” they ask.

“I am not the Messiah,” he answers.

“What then? Are you Elijah?”

“I am not.”

“Are you the prophet?”

“No.”

“Who are you then?”

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<sup>2</sup> John 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> The Prologue encompasses John 1:1-18.

<sup>4</sup> John 1:19-28.

“I am the voice crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

“Why then are you baptizing?”

“I baptize with water. *Among you* stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to unite the thong of his sandal.”

This intense exchange ends in a stalemate. The next day John is in the same location, again outside, with two of his own disciples. John sees Jesus walk by and John says to his disciples,<sup>5</sup> “This is the Lamb of God.”<sup>6</sup>

These two disciples immediately follow Jesus.

When Jesus turns and sees them, he says, “What are you seeking?”

They say, “Rabbi, where are you staying? Where are you dwelling? Where are you remaining?”

And Jesus says, “*Come and see.*”

These two disciples are Simon (who will soon be renamed Peter) and Andrew. They become the first two of twelve disciples who answer Jesus’ call to “*Come and see.*” *Come and see* who he is, *come and see* what he is about, *come and see* what they find in his life.

“*Come and see*” is *the* invitation Jesus extends to his disciples in John.<sup>7</sup>

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When Jesus says, “*Come and see,*” he is inviting those close to him, and by extension his hearers and readers across the centuries, to enter into a relationship with him, marked by watchful and penetrating eyes, to see if he is that for which they have been looking: the place of remaining, the place of staying, the place of abiding, the place of permanence for which we all yearn. He is inviting them into the “abundance of life”<sup>8</sup> he offers which begins here and now and extends after our death, which transcends the temporal and geographical limits of our earthly existence, and which offers us an abiding in eternity in what he will later describe as the “many mansions” of God’s “house.”<sup>9</sup>

They are looking, in other words, for something *ultimate*, what Paul Tillich called “the ground of being.” And to that search, Jesus says – “*Come and see.*” “*Come and see.*”

### III.

We can debate whether rhetoric in America is more confrontational and divided than it has been at any other time in our history, or whether we are simply more aware of it because of cable television and social media. But for most of us, national discourse is plenty confrontational and divided. And we can debate the degree to which the history of race in our nation ultimately defines who we are as a nation. But for many if not most of us, given the history of slavery which has so determined relations between black and white in America, and

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<sup>5</sup> John 1:29-39.

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive survey of what “Lamb of God” may mean to John’s disciples, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, i-xii I* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1966], 58-63.

<sup>7</sup> “Come and see” appears in John 1:39 spoken by Jesus to Peter and Andrew, in John 1:46 by Philip to Nathanael, in John 4:29 by the woman of Samaria, and in John 11:34 by Mary and Martha to Jesus at the grave of their brother Lazarus.

<sup>8</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>9</sup> John 14:2 KJV.

given the emotional temperature the presence of immigrants in many generations has generated among those of us already here, matters of *race* are particularly important, if not definitional, for who we are as a nation.

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The way Jesus calls his disciples to exercise their search for what is ultimate is invitational. “Come and see,” he says. Come and see for yourself what life is like following me. Come and see.

We can take his “invitational-ism” as a model for how we enter Christian faith. We can accept his invitation to come and explore Christ as the human embodiment of God. We can seek to learn about him, to serve others in his name, to pray, to worship, to establish relationships with others who likewise follow him. We become a part of the community known as the church. In doing this, when we come to explore Christ, we *see*, we *experience*, what life in his name and spirit and community is like. We “come and see.”

Whether we are Christian or not, we can follow *this same pattern* concerning race in our lives and in our nation.

Race is no longer taboo in our nation. It is okay to talk about it in polite company. It is okay to enter a relationship with another person and find out what their life is like – as a black person, as a white person, as a yellow person, as a red person, as a brown person, as a person of several different colors. It is okay to “come and see.” In fact, “coming and seeing” is the only way that we in a democratic society will make progress out of the sinful and painful parts of our nation’s past and present into a better future. It is the only way we will achieve any genuine structural change merited in our society. If we don’t “come and see” one another, the only way we will deal with the results of our past and the continuing injustices of the present is through force or violence. On the matter of race in our nation, we simply must “come and see.” “Come and see” one another.

#### IV.

At the end of my presentation in May, I quoted the then newly elected Mayor of Chicago, Lori Lightfoot, from the online commencement address she gave at Northwestern University in 2020.

...being engaged [she said] doesn’t mean *screaming* the loudest. It doesn’t mean *issuing* a set of demands and then *villainizing* anyone who doesn’t immediately pledge allegiance to your favorite manifesto. The public square should be about robust debate, working to muster the facts and arguments to *persuade*. Building coalitions, finding common ground, and of course, leaning *into* what you believe...

She concluded, telling these graduates, “I urge you, *build bridges over which others can travel to you and you to them.*”<sup>10</sup>

“Come and see.” “Come and see.” “Come and see.” It is not taboo to talk about race in our country.

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Lightfoot, L. [NorthwesternU]. (2020, June 19) Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot's keynote address at Northwestern University's 2020 Commencement [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRn3mxiB5IY>].