



Showing People Jesus

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Some of humanity's greatest, and oldest, and most popular stories begin with a call to adventure. From Homer's *Odyssey* to the Wizard of Oz, from Disney's *Finding Nemo* to Bilbo Baggins being whisked away by Gandalf and Harry Potter getting his Hogwarts letter, so many of our favourite stories start with the hero leaving behind their familiar lives and venturing out into the wide world, on an adventure.

Sometimes the call to adventure invites, sometimes circumstances demand it; but either way, off the hero goes and the story unfolds in new and exciting ways from there. A literary scholar wrote that the call to adventure is like "destiny summoning the hero and transferring his spiritual centre of gravity to a zone unknown."

We all face moments and times like that, even if we're never whisked away into any kind of epic quest. Moments that challenge our centre of gravity, unseat us from our familiar habits, and shift the direction our personal story was taking. And when Jesus is involved, often that shift is from a story about us to being part of a story that's a whole lot bigger than we can even imagine.

The story of Jesus calling his first disciples is told across all four gospels, so we know it's a significant and important moment; a real "call to adventure" to the soon-to-be disciples. The story, as told in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, is very much Jesus seeking out his disciples and saying, follow me and we'll do extraordinary things together. The exact circumstances vary, but that's the general tone: Jesus goes and finds them where they are, calls them to follow him, and off they go. An extraordinary act of faith and commitment on the part of the disciples, a generous and awe-inspiring act by Jesus, and a comforting one, to imagine him seeking us out on some ordinary day and calling us to himself.

But the gospel of John is different.

John's version of the gospel places all of its emphasis on who Jesus is and believing in Jesus, rather than following a path, working toward the kingdom, or moving through the events of Jesus' life in order, which is what we can read about in the other gospels.

Instead, Jesus' first meeting with his soon-to-be disciples involves them seeking out him, something Jesus acknowledges; and the call Jesus extends to them in return is an invitation to get to know Jesus, an invitation to relationship...which is still an adventure! Just a different kind.

Our Scripture passage today, though, begins, not with Jesus, but with John the Baptist, who has had a very successful ministry thus far preparing people for Jesus. He names Jesus the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," a title with rich meaning for God's people, referring to the Passover Lamb, whose blood protected them in Egypt, many centuries earlier; and to the Suffering Servant of the prophet Isaiah's book; and also to the lambs offered as sacrifices in Temple worship so that people could be forgiven and made right with God once more. So John was very quickly and concisely telling every Jewish person who heard him exactly who Jesus was and what Jesus would do. John has already baptized Jesus; some of you will remember that Jesus' baptism included the Spirit of God alighting upon Jesus like a dove and God's voice saying, "This is my beloved Son." And John adds that detail to his preaching, but he phrases it in a way that should spark a connection for us. John says, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." Did you catch the phrase I mean? The Spirit remained; another way of translating that Greek word is "abide." And the gospel of John is very big on mutual remaining or abiding: Christ in God and us in Christ, and in every other combination of Jesus' followers and the three persons of our Triune God. Remaining is how Jesus will later describe life with him, as one of his disciples, in John chapter 15. And it all starts at Jesus' baptism with the Spirit remaining with Jesus.

That is what John told everyone, but more importantly for us today, that's what John told his own disciples. John had already gathered several people to him as followers himself, and he was happy to see some of his followers approach Jesus with curiosity. Then, as John's disciples follow Jesus as Jesus walks along, Jesus turns to them and speaks his first words in this gospel: "what are you looking for?" And they reply, "Teacher, where are you staying?"

But a more direct translation of the original language of the Bible would put it this way: "Teacher, where are you remaining?" That's right - the same word that John used to describe the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit. They want to learn from Jesus where, he, the Spirit-filled one, is remaining. And Jesus says, "Come and see."

This pattern of invitation marks Jesus' life and ministry as a Teacher, from gathering his disciples to the Transfiguration on the mountaintop, from working miracles to the night of painful prayer in the garden, Jesus keeps inviting his disciples to be near, to stay, to remain with him. And it's the invitation that Jesus continues to make, as he reveals himself to us: stay with me, remain with me and let me remain in you. Get to know me, as I know and already love you.

The soon-to-be disciples do remain with Jesus; and here, finally, we get a name for one of the invitees. And one that's rather close-to-home at that: Andrew, whom we're named after. Andrew, it seems, had been a disciple of John the Baptist; a spiritual seeker with a curious heart long before we get to know him in the gospels. Andrew had heard a promise revealed by John the Baptist about the coming Messiah, and then he heard John say that this promise was indicated through the Spirit's abiding, or remaining, and that Jesus was the man.

So Andrew accepted Jesus' invitation to come and see - to experience this "remaining" for himself - and now, Andrew knows. He knows who Jesus is, and there is no place he'd rather be. Except that Andrew wants others who are seeking to know, too. So Andrew goes to get his brother Peter and invites his brother to see for himself.

This is, of course, the Peter we know from so many Bible stories, whom we relate to very easily sometimes with his ups and downs of enthusiasm and faith and failure. Andrew tells Peter, "we have found the Messiah" and then Andrew does what he does best, and often, during Jesus' ministry: he takes someone, in this case, Peter, to Jesus. He shows Peter Jesus. And Jesus knows Peter already, gives him a new name, and invites him in, too.

At heart, that's what the gospel of John is about, with his focus on who Jesus is; it's what our post-Christmas church season of Epiphany is about: showing people Jesus. Showing people Jesus is what John the Baptist does, too; after preparing the way, he finishes the job by pointing Jesus out and identifying him in words and with an image - the Lamb of God - that were readily understandable in the Jewish culture of which he was a part.

And then there's Andrew who, in all four gospels, follows Jesus and very often, shows other people Jesus, too, including them in that invitation to relationship, to remain and abide in Christ. And it seems to me that this passage isn't just a summary of events or even just the final step in transitioning from John the Baptist's public ministry to Jesus' public ministry. It's also a story of John's role as announcer and messenger transitioning to the disciples.

Instead of John preparing the way for Jesus and showing people Jesus, the disciples will take up this mantle; they begin to be the ones who not only follow and look to learn from Jesus the Messiah themselves, but also the ones who tell other people about him - just as Andrew does here with his brother, Simon Peter.

And from here, the story will go on to recount how more of the disciples came to remain with Jesus; we won't be following the story in John's gospel ourselves this year, but it's worth remembering that in between Jesus' birth and his death and resurrection, Jesus had a life. A life that was very much about teaching us that Jesus is very focused on remaining, abiding, with his people here on earth, forever.

What really grabbed me in this version of the beginning of Jesus' ministry from John's gospel, what really draws me in is that Jesus starts with a question: "what are you looking for?" Jesus doesn't do that in the other three gospels; there's a lot more declarative statements in those, about good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, repentance and the kingdom of God, which are amazing and inspiring in their own right.

But that question; that's a good question...one we might ask ourselves, too, at times, about Jesus and why we follow him, or even just in general.

What are we looking for?

When we're feeling restless or unfulfilled, maybe, feeling that life should be more than it is somehow, what are we looking for? When we are uncertain or unhappy or anxious or sad - what are we looking for? When we are full of energy and ready for the next adventure, what are we looking for?

It might be an exciting question; it might be an uncomfortable one. Among our well-known literary heroes who answered the call to adventure, Bilbo Baggins at his relatable best said that adventures are nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things that make you late for dinner. And then he went adventuring anyway.

There are a lot of voices these days that'll tell us what we're looking for, whether it's something we can buy or an experience we can have, a new self-care routine or a get-away to somewhere exotic enough to feel spiritual. Sometimes, it's hard to know what we're looking for, and it's easiest to just agree with what we're told we need or ought to have. Jesus stands out, I think, by asking us to consider what we're looking for, and then simply inviting us to come and see if we can find it by abiding with him.

So whether you would consider yourself a follower of Jesus or if you're more curious-but-listening, I invite you to give Jesus' question some thought: what are you looking for?

It's not just a question for the young, or the uncertain, or those in a time of transition in their lives. It's a question for the content, the well-established and the long-term follower, too. Jesus came, remember, so that we might have life abundantly, so there's always room for more! What are you looking for? Are you willing to risk being unseated from your familiar centre of gravity, your well-worn paths, and shifting the direction of your personal story toward Jesus?

Jesus' first disciples went even further than that. Not only did they remain - abide - in Jesus themselves, they invited others to consider the same; to share in their experience and find what they were looking for, too - things like hope, certainty and purpose, growth and peace. And that's just my list - I'm sure many of you could come up with your own. The disciples took up John the Baptist's role and, eventually, Jesus' work, too, showing people Jesus through the community that formed around him, and because of him. A community that we are part of today.

I know we're called St. Andrew's because of the patron saint of Scotland Presbyterian connection; but I wonder if our name couldn't serve as a reminder for us too; a reminder that we are meant to show people Jesus, just like Andrew did. Jesus certainly liked names with a purpose, renaming Peter as Cephas, which means stone or rock - and that was what Peter eventually became by remaining with Jesus: the rock upon which Jesus built his church.

So maybe our name could be a reminder that although Jesus first invites us to come and see and remain with him ourselves, we are also called to invite others to see if they can find what they're looking for, by showing them Jesus. Thanks be to God, amen.