

The Jesus We Almost Know

(JOHN 1:29-42 NRSV) *The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* ³⁰*This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'* ³¹*I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."* ³²*And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him."* ³³*I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'* ³⁴*And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."* ³⁵*The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,* ³⁶*and as he watched Jesus* *walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"* ³⁷*The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.* ³⁸*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?"* ³⁹*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.* ⁴⁰*One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.* ⁴¹*He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (Anointed).* ⁴²*He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).*

Most of you in this room are not ministers—you're not preachers—and therefore you may not know that on the preacher's side of pulpits in many churches, there is a little brass plate. It's positioned so that the preacher will see it just before he/she stands to preach.

One minister I know suggests that the plate should read, "Check your fly." When I wear a robe I sometimes tell people it's so I don't have to worry about embarrassing myself in that way.

The plate really is inscribed with a verse from John's Gospel: "Sir, we would see Jesus." When all is said and done, people attend a service of Christian worship not to count the snowflakes, or to hear a book review of the hottest title on the *New York Times* bestseller list, or even for meditation or self-reflection, but for an experience. You've come today to experience "God with us" in Jesus. Preacher, we want to see Jesus.

Well, you can imagine how that makes us preachers feel. Talk about pressure! My late teacher once said, "Sometimes you stand in the pulpit and every word in your pathetic little sermon raises its hand and asks, 'May I please be excused?'"

There's a story of an old Welch preacher who was climbing up the staircase into his pulpit, and about halfway up was overcome by the awesomeness of his task. He began to back down as if he'd seen a ghost, and with his face pale with fear he said, "I will not go into that awful place." Preacher, we want to see Jesus.

The problem is, Jesus is notoriously difficult to see. It doesn't seem that way in popular parlance, where Jesus is presented in comfortable, familiar imagery,

undemanding, like a permissive nanny. And it doesn't seem difficult in the stuffy academic circles of biblical scholarship, where some want to dissect him and examine him under a microscope.

The wonderful thing is that Jesus is a living presence who keeps eluding our grasp. He's not a historical artifact. He won't lie still on the examination table; nor will he join the guys at the nineteenth hole for a few cools ones. He keeps spilling over the walls we build to box him into our comfortable categories.

There's just a lot about Jesus we don't know—a lot we can't see. Even John the Baptist had trouble. Twice in this text he says, "I myself didn't recognize him." Twice he said it! "My whole ministry has been anticipating him, but now I didn't know him when I saw him!"

John stood rooted solidly in history. "I am a voice crying in the wilderness." I know that the world as we know it is not what God intends it to be. God is bringing in something much more hopeful, but I can't quite see it. I don't yet know it. I can point to it, but I can't grasp it.

A lot of Christian living is like that. Those of you who teach school understand it: you who work for the dignity of children in a world that tries to strip it away, those of you in business who strive for fairness and integrity in a double-dealing world, those of you in medicine who work for health in a land of disease, those of you in law who work for justice in an unjust society; *all* of you who tomorrow morning will get out of bed and go out and try to make the world a better place. If somebody came to you and asked, "Theologically, exactly what are you doing?" you might not be able to answer. Nevertheless, there you are: hoping you're following Jesus, hoping, somehow that your life reflects Jesus, even if you can't fully say how, or with what result.

A school shooting every 60 hours in the first 45 days of this year. Almost one school shooting per week since Sandy Hook, December 14, 2012. Approximately 350 since Columbine, almost 19 years ago. And as of this moment, I'm not aware of any comprehensive, viable strategy—or even of a proactive effort—to confront such evil. We can identify with John the Baptist: "I stand here in the wilderness hoping and striving for a better world; but, I cannot yet name it."

John recognized the Christ, not in the classroom or sitting under some dynamic preacher, but in the midst of his work, living out his calling. He was baptizing in the Jordan River, and suddenly as he raised one man up from the water, John got it. John saw the Spirit come down, and he got it.

It was not the result of reason or study; it was revelation. Divine gift. A manifestation of the Spirit of God. It was Grace.

Paul wrote in the first letter to the church at Corinth, "No one can say, 'Je-

sus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." (12:3) The "good confession" we say before our baptism is inspired speech.

And the gift is a change—a conversion—from "I did not know him" to "I have seen and have borne witness." And here is the witness: "Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the world."

And look what happens when John bears witness: Andrew and some others followed Jesus. And look what happens when Andrew followed Jesus: He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah". He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Peter." And you know about Peter.

ONE WAY YOU CAN KNOW WHEN YOU'VE REALLY—REALLY—HAD AN EXPERIENCE OF THE LIVING CHRIST IS THAT YOU CAN'T WAIT TO SHARE IT!

Tom Long, preaching teacher at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, tells about a preacher friend who was touring Scotland recently. One afternoon he found himself alone in one of Scotland's magnificent cathedrals. As he walked around in that vast, empty space, he made his way to the pulpit. It was a lofty pulpit with a winding staircase. He stood at the foot of the staircase and looked up and saw that little brass plaque. He thought to himself, I can't think of anything more inspiring than to stand in that pulpit and look out over this great space and read those words, "Sir, we would see Jesus."

Confirming that no one was around, he ventured up the stairs. When he got to the pulpit he looked out into the great cathedral and breathed deeply and read the plaque. It said: "Remember Edna Bailey."

At first, he was disappointed; he wanted to see, "Sir, we would see Jesus." But it slowly began to dawn on him that one of the best ways to see Jesus is to remember Edna Bailey, and Andrea Hall, and Tom Palmer, and Orlan Jones, and Dorothy Rigdon, and Inez Buffalo, and Barbara Broadhurst, and Etta Oertell... and those many others you and I know who came to know Jesus—whose lives reflected, in some small, ethereal, almost indistinguishable way "God with us;" "Emmanuel;" Jesus.