

Epiphany/Ordinary 2
Isaiah 49:1-7
John 1:29-42
January 20, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC
Notes not for publication

I know it's hard to believe I'm this old (!), but I remember the year 1968. I was five years old, and we lived in Portland, Texas, where my daddy was the preacher. I actually remember a lot of things from when I was five, but I have vivid memories of TV, and especially the TV news. We still had a very small black and white set back then, with the buttons on the side, sitting on a black tripod stand. And the world would come to a screeching halt every weekday at 5:30, when the evening news came on. There are a lot of folks these days who don't really want their kids to see the evening news, for all the terrible things they talk about. I'm not sure what it was they normally showed on the news in 1968, but I know the things I remember. And I'm sure a lot of you do, too.

Perhaps clearest in my memory is the coverage of Bobby Kennedy's shooting. For years I thought I had actually witnessed the event live on TV. But I also remember the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. And it may be that I remembered these things because of the distress they provoked in my home, in my parents. As I told you last year at this time, my dad had participated in lunch counter sit-ins in Dallas during seminary in the early 60's. My mother tells of washing pesticide spray out of his clothes after one such outing. And what I learned as a child was the power of the non-violent stand in the midst of violence. By watching King and Kennedy die, I learned that change in social relationships, shifts in power, do not come easily—as King wrote in his

"Letter from a Birmingham Jail," (which you should look up and read online) those with power and privilege will often turn to violent means to keep from having to share it and "groups tend to be more immoral than individuals" ("LFABJ," kingpapers.org). There was this context that was frightening to me, this darkness that seemed bigger than any one person, though some of those people were pretty frightening too.

But I also learned—and I learned this in the church—that the gospel held a powerful word in the face of such darkness. I learned that God has an agenda for us and for the world, and that it involves change. And finally I learned that the change God seeks comes by way of an unlikely source—vulnerability, non-violence, and love, all rolled up in a steely, rock-hard determination. Many people learned this truth through the life and ministry of Martin Luther King and so many who followed him. King's efforts and achievements as a leader were not just political activity. His risk-taking, courageous work sprang up as a witness to the power of God.

The text we read today from John's gospel marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry and it too is a story of witness. It's a strange story to try to follow—"What are you looking for?" "Where are you staying?" "Come and see." (What?) But as usual in this gospel, there are clues hidden in the text that tip us off to its meaning. One clue is that if you go through the passage, you'll find a dozen or so references to seeing or looking or finding:

- vs. 29: John SAW Jesus
- vs. 31: That He might BE REVEALED to Israel
- vs. 32: John SAW the Spirit descending
- vs. 33: "He on whom you SEE the Spirit descend..."
- vs. 34: "I myself have seen..."
- vs. 36: As John WATCHED Jesus..."LOOK! Here is..."
- vs. 38: When Jesus SAW them following..."What are you LOOKING for?"

vs. 39: Jesus says, "Come and SEE." They came and SAW..."
vs. 41: Andrew FOUND his brother, Simon..."We have FOUND the Messiah."
vs. 42: Jesus LOOKED at Simon...

(Glen S., OH, dps.com, January 15, 2008)

Scholars tell us that these words as used over and over make this a story about witnessing. And you know the word "witness" generally has two meanings: one is to see something happen, and the other is to testify, or tell publicly about a belief or experience. John the Baptist testified (witnessed) to what he had seen (witnessed), which was the Holy Spirit coming to rest on Jesus. He didn't know Jesus, according to this scripture, but he had this experience of revelation that showed him who Jesus was, the abiding relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit of God. John saw this, and he told about it. He witnessed.

As a result of the witness of John the Baptist, others came to encounter Jesus as well and came to know who he was. Two of John's own disciples followed Jesus; one of them was Andrew, who went and got his brother, Simon, whom Jesus renamed Peter. This is how the calling of the disciples goes in this gospel; next week we'll hear the more familiar story of Jesus calling the fishermen from their boats. But here disciples are made when they come into contact with Jesus. They see him, really see him, and then they tell what they have seen.

What's interesting about how they tell in this passage is the number of different names and descriptions they use for Jesus. Lamb of God, the One who takes away the sin of the world, Baptizer with the Holy Spirit, the One on whom the Spirit rests, Son of God, Rabbi, and Messiah—all in one story. Here again these terms are clues—they show us the individual nature of witnessing to Christ. Each person in this story

discovers Jesus for himself; each one encounters the revelation personally. They come from different places, different situations, with different needs. So what each one calls Jesus is determined in part by what they need from him (Gail O'Day, *NIB*, Vol. IX, p. 533).

Jesus responds to that need. He sees the two disciples of John following him and turns and asks them, "What are you looking for?" It's a question that jumps off the page, out of the story and into our consciousness; clearly this question is meant for us, too. What are we looking for when we start to follow Jesus? What is the need we carry, the urge behind our searching?

I've looked for a lot of things in my life as a follower of Jesus, especially within the church. In my adolescence, following my parents' divorce, I carried a lot of pain. I felt like I had a nice enough outside, pleasing to others, but that my insides were not good enough, by any measure. Through my involvement in the youth group, my trips to camp, my leadership in the church, I was looking for a word that I was OK, that I was good enough, that God loved me and people might too, that my troubled insides could find a place of rest. Sometimes I found what I was looking for, even if briefly; certainly I found enough of it to stick around and keep coming back. I can't say I found complete healing for my pain, but I believed I would one day; the promise was there, and I believed it.

So when you ask me who Jesus is, to testify or witness to what I have seen and felt, my response speaks both of what I learned about power and non-violence and of grace poured out as a free gift to me, the approval and acceptance I so craved, the

realization that God didn't need me to earn it or to prove that I was worthy. My testimony, my witness tells of the openness of the gospel, the invitation to the table for everybody, the fact that Jesus knows our pain and feels it with us, and the passion of God to see justice done.

I believe I came to understand these things not because of any good in me, but only because I went looking. Ask, and you shall receive; knock, and the door will be opened unto you—it's not magic, and it's not poof, your troubles are gone. It is revelation, the gift of seeing God's nature revealed. I can stand up here and tell you about it in my life; others can tell stories more compelling, and these can help open people up, make them start looking, thinking about it all and wondering whether some of it might be true. But we come to know in our hearts when God reveals to us, uncovers for us, what had been hidden: the presence of Love with us all along. The Spirit comes down to rest and stay someplace where we've been looking, and we know.

Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?" and his followers respond, oddly, "Where are you staying?" But again a deeper meaning lies buried. The word for "staying" here is one we find throughout John's gospel often translated as "abiding." The question means on one level, "In which house are you sleeping?" but it also can mean, "Jesus, with whom do you abide? With whom will you remain? Where can we find your presence? Where can we trust you to be?" And to this question, Jesus replies, "Come and see."

Martin King was one who accepted that invitation. He was a theologian who studied at Boston University, the best thinking the church had produced, mostly white

scholars from the US and Europe. But he was also a black Baptist preacher's kid, raised amidst the songs and stories of the church, just a couple of generations removed from slavery. He brought to Christ a need based in the brutal violence inflicted upon black people in this society—a need that bore both personal pain and righteous anger on behalf of the oppressed. King knew what he was looking for in Christ. Jesus said to him, “come and see,” and he got up and went. And I truly believe that he was able to do what he did because he had experienced the revelation of Christ as Liberator, as fellow Sufferer under oppression, as non-violent peacemaker who yet would not yield in the fight for justice, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. All of this gave shape to King's witness, and that witness has changed the world.

If you had to get up and testify today—any volunteers?—what would you say? If you were to testify to the light of the world, what story could you tell about how you came to know what you know? Have you accepted Christ's invitation to come and see? Have you looked to see where his presence rests and abides? Have you found his presence and learned his name? We are not Martin Luther King, Jr., and our witness may not shift a whole nation and make it into the history books—but still, we must know something. You must have seen something, felt something, experienced something that has convinced you to show up here and claim your seat, to make you want to serve God through this church.

Your story of finding and following Christ is as precious to God as any other. And the fact is, you will have an impact in the world that no one else can have. Your witness can touch someone no one else will reach. Because it will be a story about

someone who didn't get it all right, who maybe didn't hear Jesus' voice the first time, who's struggled and stumbled and groped around in the dark, finally turning toward the light—oh wait, that's my story! You and I both are part of the divine plan to reveal God's love to the world. Somebody needs to hear your story, born of your pain and God's gift in response. They need to hear you pass along the invitation, "Come and see."

The world cries out, and our children are watching. What will our witness be?

I was reading a discussion this week weighing possible sources of King's theological thinking. Black theologian James Cone notes that King publicly named various white theologians as "sources for his theological perspective" (409). But Cone asserts that underlying King's intellectual, academic work, is the experience of growing up in the black church in the South, during the first half of the 20th century. "the oppression of black people and the liberating message of the black church."
(James Cone, theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jan1984/v40-4-article3.htm)

Although the Church has been called to combat social evils, it has often remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows...How often the Church has been an echo rather than a voice, a tail-light behind the Supreme Court and other secular agencies, rather than a headlight guiding men and women progressively and decisively to higher levels of understanding.

Words of Dr. King quoted from United Church of Christ, "Minutes Fifth General Synod, Chicago, Illinois, July 1-7, 1965."
Edited by Fred S. Buschmeyer.

The beauty of personal testimony is its honesty. John says, in so many words, "Look! It's the Lamb of God. I didn't really recognize him at first, but I will tell you about my experience, how I came to know him in my life." As Andrew and Simon discover, Jesus will be revealed to them in completely different ways. They will have to "come and see" for themselves, and they will have their own stories to tell about how they came to know and to love the Lamb of God. Personal testimonies are powerful because they speak through the particular circumstances of our lives. They tell of the variety of ways that we fail to recognize Jesus as the Son of God, and the ways in which, despite our

failures, Jesus makes himself known to us anyway. (Erin Martin, Blogging toward Sunday, theolog.org, 01/14/2008)

God of Grace, Love Incarnate, we praise you for all your faithful servants who have done justice, loved mercy, and walked humbly with their God. Especially this day we thank you for Martin Luther King, Jr., for his courage and conviction, his passion for peace, and his obedience to your call upon his life. Enable us in the energy of your Spirit, to hear the hard word and even to speak it when necessary. Soften our hearts, strengthen our commitment, and continue to challenge us, O God. Through the life of Christ, and redeem our tendency toward violence and self-centered fear. And place always before us a vision of the Beloved Community, bending our wills and inspiring us to labor for it. In the strong name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Sermon - "Come and See," The Rev. Barbara K. Lundblad, dayone.net, January 20, 2002