

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
January 15, 2023
Year A, Epiphany 1
Annual Parish Meeting
Come and See

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-12
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Years ago, I was sitting at the opening convocation of 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church when a woman walked by. In her late forties, tall and handsome, dressed in a knee-length skirt and a form-fitting *purple* shirt and clerical collar, her whole demeanor, her whole *being* exuded a sort of gracious authority. She was the coolest-looking bishop I had ever laid eyes on. And, perhaps this says a lot about me, but I was star-struck. I *had* to know who she was.

Her name is Mary Gray-Reeves and she was the then-Bishop of the Diocese of El Camino Real in California. I eventually *did* meet her at Convention. I was as fumbling and tongue-tied as a pre-teen meeting Taylor Swift but she was as gracious and cool as I thought she'd be. Some people are like that – you can tell just by looking at them that they are a kind of star.

Interestingly, though, Jesus seems to have *not* been that kind of person. Today, we hear that, if it weren't for John the Baptist pointing him out, Jesus might have walked by Andrew and Peter and all the rest of his eventual apostles without their noticing him. At least twice, John the Baptist has to identify Jesus. Nothing about his person shouts "I'm the Messiah" or exudes divinity incarnate.

And yet, once they hear the Baptist's witness about Jesus, once they *do* notice him, those first disciples seem just as star-struck as I was meeting Bishop Mary. Jesus asks them, "What are you looking for?" but they seem to have lost their train of thought. They stammer out, "Where are you staying?" They've finally met the Messiah and the only thing they can think to ask him about is his address.

But, maybe it's not such a fumbling question as it first sounds. After all, if your favorite celebrity came to Chattanooga, you might ask them, "where are you staying?" in an attempt to catch another glimpse later on. Of course, today's celebrity is not likely to actually *tell* you that info. But Jesus does just that – and more. When Andrew and his companions ask Jesus, "Where are you staying?" Jesus responds with an invitation: "Come and see."

Come and see. Jesus encourages the young men to get in close. He invites complete strangers into his house and his life in a unique way. First come, says Jesus, then see.

And, at least in our enlightened world, that logic *is* unique. We modern folks tend to like to know where we're going, what we're getting ourselves into *before* we decide to take that first step. Lawyers are paid thousands to make sure both sides of a merger understand exactly how the new business will look before anyone signs on. Parents and their children look at schools and colleges before deciding whether or not to enroll. Even our GPS shows us the whole map of our route before we click "start" on the directions. In today's world, we like to *see* before we go.

But Jesus challenges his disciples to flip that: “Come and see.” Jesus invites his disciples to follow him *first* and to trust that seeing – understanding – only happens along the way. Only by following can we begin to understand where Jesus is taking us.

And that’s risky business, isn’t it? – to follow without first knowing, understanding, *seeing* where it is we’re going. But that’s what Christian life is all about. We cannot plan where we’re going or where we’ll end up so we must have faith that if we *trust* enough to follow Christ we will, someday, see.

But this following without seeing is difficult. “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity,” says the servant of God in Isaiah. This follower doesn’t see if or how his efforts have or could bring about any change for the good of God’s creation. It seems to him unlikely that he will be a good servant, a messenger or a light to the nations.

And, we’re all like that, aren’t we? Unlikely servants. If we try to see ourselves as followers first, if we take an objective look at our Christian resumé, to make sure we look like good disciples *before* we follow the Christ, we’ll never take that first step. There’s nothing about any of us – not even glamorous Bishop Mary Gray-Reeves – that shouts “perfect disciple” or “excellent Christian.” Each of us is flawed.

But Christ does not say, “Make sure you’ll be a good follower and then follow me.” No. Come, *then* see, says Jesus. In following Him, all of us unlikely servants will begin to understand ourselves, by the grace of God, as true disciples of Christ. Follow him and we will see where that takes us, how that forms us into the people God calls us to be. The unlikely servant in Isaiah can and does fulfill God’s promise: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified,” God insists.

And although this invitation is for each of us as individuals, it is also an invitation to us as community, as Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church. Take a superficial glance at us, and perhaps we don’t have that star quality, either. We’re a small parish with our own set of disagreements and difficulties, changes and challenges. We are striving to discern God’s will for us and to live fully into it. And sometimes, like this moment, with my departure in just a few months, with a \$50,000 deficit in the budget for the year ahead, with so many unknowns and uncertainties, it may feel daunting to continue to risk so much for the mission of Christ at Thankful.

But Jesus’ invitation to us remains: come and see. Follow first and *then* find out where you are being led. Take the risk. Do the work. Trust God and discover how we are “the church of God” at Thankful, “called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Perhaps we are unlikely, but when we journey together with Christ, we discover our discipleship, our calling in and as a Christian community. And I give thanks for that. I give thanks for you Thankful Ones. Indeed, to quote St Paul, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift... God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Come and see. Amen.