Sermon on Epiphany 2 Year A 2023
(John 1:29-42)

One of the fascinating things about John’s telling of the Jesus story is how he so clearly isn’t just filling in the historical background; he isn’t “reporting on Jesus’ ministry,” like a journalist would, this despite that weird detail about “4 pm (what’s that doing there?), he’s doing something more interesting.

As he’s telling the story of Jesus he’s also crafting an a spiritual path for all his readers and listeners. Everything has an existential edge to it. And by existential I mean there’s a “nowness,” a “we are there, in the story” feel to it.

John drops us into the scenes by having us view them through the eyes of someone who was there watching, seeking to understand.

By doing this we find ourselves in the scene, *we’re the ones* who are looking through these characters’ eyes; we find ourselves in the scene looking but also grappling with what’s unfolding, grappling with what it means for us. We are experiencing their questions, we can hear Jesus speaking, to us!

We begin by looking through John the Baptist’s eyes. It’s the day after Jesus’ baptism, that incredible event that we celebrated last week, the event that changes the course of Jesus’ ministry.

It changed his self-understanding as he came to realize his call to stand in solidarity with all of us.

Jesus’ baptism and his experience of call and affirmation as the Beloved Son is not lost on John. He is having his own existential moment as he realizes the incredible depth of what he has witnessed.

And so when he sees Jesus walking towards him he says these amazing words “here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

We’re confronted here with some of the most astonishing words ever said about another human being.

Here is the person, we see through John’s eyes, who takes away the sins of the entire world, not just forgives them, but takes them away, that is, makes their impact, their shaping power, null and void.

And the implication is, clearly, that if someone is able to do *that*, then he would have the power to set everything right!

As we look through John’s eyes we’re shaken by this; we’re shaken because if this person in front of us is the one to do *that,* then clearly he is the most important person we could every pay attention to, the one we, all the world, desperately *needs!*

But in the same instant we question it; we’re aware that even as we’re looking through John the Baptizer’s eyes, that John, now John the author who wrote this, knows that this didn’t happen, or at least that what John the Baptist says isn’t meant to be interpreted as an immediate thing or “complete in the moment” thing.

It's like when you realize that the one before you is the one you love, the one you want to spend your life with and it’s like you can see both the present impact and the future, the future consequences of that in your mind’s eye.

And so John the author is expecting us to pause, to wrestle with this conundrum; what can it mean that here we have the one who will take away the sins of the world, but who in his ministry on earth, if he does this, has done it/will do it in a way that is not immediately apparent to us.

I mean the last time I checked there are still sins in this world that have not been taken away! Am I right or am I confused when I read the news; or when I experience my own failures?

As we keep looking through John’s eyes we notice his identifier of Jesus as someone who is “the lamb of God.” We note that Jesus is of God but that he appears to be God’s sacrifice. Lambs weren’t pets in Israel, they were often sacrifices.

This is very strange. God is not into human sacrifice. And so we’re very puzzled. At the same time we find that this may be part of the answer as to how it is that he will “take away the sins of the world.”

Perhaps by being God’s sacrifice, whatever that means, this person, this Jesus, will create a set of circumstances that will allow things to be put right.

This is what a sacrifice does. When soldiers sacrifice their lives they hope, we hope, and we recognize, that their injuries, their death, will begin to create a condition in which evil is robbed of it’s strength so that peace can begin to be experienced.

Taken together this is an extraordinary description of a human being who is walking towards us and we are captivated, we are completely undone by this and need to know more.

And so the next day, the author John drops us into another scene which at first reprises what has happened yesterday, again John is standing with two of his disciples, and again Jesus is walking by.

Humorously, where is John? There appears to be some weird, mystical intersection at the corner of the wilderness out by the Jordan and mainstreet somewhere that he seems to be standing and Jesus seems to be constantly ambling by.

Be that as it may, again John says when he sees Jesus “Look, here is the lamb of God.”

The two disciples who are with John, one of whom is Andrew, become these enthralled wonderers and now we’re looking through their eyes as they begin their own existential quest as followers of Jesus.

When Jesus sees that they are wanting to know more, that they’re no longer content to stand on the street corner but step out into the street to follow him he engages them.

He deliberately turns and asks them “What are you looking for?” I’ve found that this is *the* spiritual question.

There’s no point giving someone something they’re not looking for. There’s no point telling people “this is the way you should live” if you’re not helping them get in touch with what they really want.

I love recommending books to people who are readers but it would be kind of dumb for me to recommend something that is not what they’re looking for.

Why would I give a history book to somebody who’s not looking to dive into the history of the tradition but who really wants a contemporary book on meditation?

A couple of times I’ve gotten a speeding ticket. I remember an officer asking me “where do you need to get to that you’re driving so fast?”

I’m sure it’s a line many officers use but as a priest I heard the existential undertones; “why are you so driven?” “Do you think there’s a safe haven at the end of your speeding?” “Do you think you might be driving towards your own grave if you’re going to keep this up?”

So when Jesus asks “what are you looking for?” he’s asking a similar question. What are you looking for in your pursuits? In your quest for security? For meaning? For control?

Are you finding what you’re looking for? How do you imagine that coming into a relationship with me might affect the answer to that question?

As they will come to learn, what they are looking for is something that is connected to Jesus, to his mission, and this is just as important, to a lifestyle that will make partnering in that mission possible.

What we are looking for in connection to life, to God, to the Christ is a partnership of unfolding that involves not only our curiosity but choices around lifestyle, commitments and actions.

There will be many steps, there will be a journey. The first question will be “where are you staying?”

That is, where is God in our lives? Where is Christ? It’s a great question to ask. Perhaps we think we know or perhaps we’re not sure; perhaps we feel it’s time we re-explore the question by means of a slightly different path and know it again as if for the first time.

Whatever the case, Jesus’ answer, “Come and See” as he looks them/us in the eye, is an invitation we dare take up only as we’re ready to come to fresh understandings of that ache in our soul, our pain, our need for further healing, our need to engage with the world and with God in a new way.

This journey becomes our identity. That’s why Simon son of John, the reactive, unstable one gets named Peter, the rock. Not that he is that yet, but like all of us, he’s now called to become who he is.

And so another way of understanding the spiritual journey is revealed: as you follow Christ you are on the path towards your true self?

This then is our story, as much as it was John the Baptist’s, Andrew and Simon’s. It is our invitation to a life in which the fundamental questions are laid on the table, not at sometime, but now at 11:30 on a Sunday morning (Ah, now I see what that 4 pm is doing there!).

As you look at him looking at you, what question will you ask?