

Come and See by Jo Schonewolf, Wesley Theological Seminary Intern

Preached on January 14, 2018 at Salem United Methodist Church

Scripture: John 1:14, 16-18, 29-50; Psalm 139

Charles, the kid that I nanny, is about one, and has started doing something new in the past week. Whenever I hand him a toy he loves, he'll take it, hold it up to his face for a few seconds, and then lower it back down with a huge smile on his face. It's adorable, but confusing.

After a few times watching this, though, I realized what he was doing. He was giving his toys a kiss to show that he loved them. He's gotten tons of kisses from his parents and grandparents, so he knows that this is a way he can show his love. He's just a little... slobbery when he does it.

Sometimes, I think we show God love the way Charles shows his toys love. We've seen the way other people express their love for God, which is part of what we do in worship, but we're not used to doing it yet ourselves. We try, but it doesn't look quite the way we want.

Our sermon series for Epiphany is about encountering God in worship and as we go through it, I want you to keep Charles in mind. It's easy to smile at his sloppy wet kisses because he's a baby and he's still learning, but it's good for us to remember that we're still learning too, and to give ourselves that same generosity of spirit we give to others. So as we turn to focus on the word today, I want us to inhale a deep breath, find that generous spirit, breathe out... and pray with me, if you want.

Prayer: Lord God of all times and places, thank you for bring us to this time and place. Be with us today and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Worship is meant to be a place where we come to respond to God's love with love of our own. I think that part of our problem in knowing how to respond to God's love is that we're not exactly sure who God is. I know that that's my problem much of the time. I know that I'm supposed to love the Lord my God with all my heart and all my soul and all my strength, [Deuteronomy 6:5] but I'm not really sure who the Lord my God is. I haven't seen God with my own two eyes [John 1:18] and it's hard to know how to love something I haven't seen.

But I tend to take the words of Jesus to heart and I tend to take Jesus at his word, so when I read passages like our gospel lesson and our psalm for today, I am reminded that I don't need to know everything ahead of time. Sometimes, all God is asking of me is to come and see. I can bring all my doubts and questions and problems, as long as I come and see.

So let's look at the gospel passage and see what's there, and let's start at the end and work our way backward.

[John 1: 43-50] In verse 43, we meet Phillip. Phillip from Bethsaida. Jesus found him and told him to follow him and presumably he did, because Phillip then goes to Nathanael and tells him about this Jesus he's just met. Nathanael is hesitant because Jesus is from Nazareth and Nazareth is... not exactly anywhere important. It's a place that certain high-ranking government officials today would dismiss in immigration discussions. And so Nathanael, showing his own bias against what he sees as a lesser town, says to Phillip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And Phillip says, "Come and see."

So Nathanael does, and he goes to meet this Jesus from Podunk, Galilee, and when he does, Jesus says to him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael has a bit of a reaction to this statement. *What are you trying to say here, stranger? You don't even know me. Have we met before? How do you know anything about me?* "Where did you get to know me?" is what he actually asks Jesus. And Jesus says, "I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip called you." And Nathanael replies, "You are the Son of God!"

You have to pause and do a double-take in this moment in the story. Nathanael, not five verses before, had dismissed Jesus with his, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" and now here he is, proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God. What changed?

Well, he went to see Jesus. That tends to change people.

But not only did he go see Jesus, Jesus saw him. In fact, Nathanael hadn't even gotten to Jesus before Jesus spoke to him. Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and proclaimed that he had no deceit in him. Not only did Jesus see him from far off, Jesus saw him before Nathanael had come to see Jesus. Jesus saw him under the fig tree.

Now Nathanael, being a good Jew, would have known the words of Psalm 139:

Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You are acquainted with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely. [Psalm 139: 1-6]

The God that Nathanael knows is a God who is everywhere and who knows us better than we know ourselves, knew us before we could even know ourselves. Before each of us was even a hint of a thought in our parents' minds, God knew all the days that were formed for us, when none of them as yet existed. [Psalm 139:13-16] And here, Nathanael finds Jesus knowing things no regular human should know, things that he knows God knows. Like the woman by the well a few chapters later [John 4], who tells everyone to come and see this man who told her everything she's ever done, Nathanael knows that Jesus is not just some prophet or teacher. And so he says, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!"

[John 1: 40-42] But Nathanael comes in at the end of the story of the calling of the disciples. Back up a few verses and we get the story of Simon Peter, who is brought by his brother Andrew to Jesus. Jesus looks at him and says, "Simon son of Jonah, you are to be called Peter." Jesus sees Peter, knows who he is, and names him so that others can know who he is too. Peter, Jesus' rock.

[John 1: 35-39] Back up a little more and we get the story of how Andrew and another disciple come to Jesus. Andrew and this other disciple are standing with John the Baptist, who they've been following. John the Baptist watches Jesus walk by and says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" and that's enough for these two. They go and follow Jesus.

Now Jesus, he turns to them and says, "What are you looking for?" And they don't exactly answer. They know that Jesus is someone important to them, but they haven't exactly figured out how to say that yet. They're like Charles with his toy. But they know they want to be around him, so they ask him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" And Jesus says, "Come and see." And they do, and they stay with him the rest of the day. For them, the invitation to come and see was an invitation to come and stay.

[John 1: 32-34] And if we back up a little more, we get these words from John the Baptist that we heard last week. "I saw the Spirit descend on him like a dove," John says, and so he testifies to what he has seen, that this Jesus is the Son of God.

John the Baptist is, of course, telling us again the thing that John the gospel-writer wants us to know: that Jesus is the Son of God, the Word who became flesh and lived among us, whose glory we have seen, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. [John 1: 14] John's gospel sets out to tell you, again and again, in as many ways as it can, that Jesus is God and that God's Word taking on flesh makes all the difference in the world. The God who knows our every thought, who will find us if we settle on the far side of the sea or rise up on wings of the dawn or make our bed in the depths, the God whose knowledge is too much for us to comprehend [Psalm 139: 6-10], that God came to Earth to be with us, **out of God's great love for us.**

Some people see that truth and know it and they respond like John the Baptist. They proclaim.

Some people hear about that truth and they follow it, like Andrew and Simon Peter. They're told to come and see and they do. They follow.

Some people hear about that truth and they go to question it, like Nathanael. They're told to come and see and when they do, they're met with the truth made flesh. They follow and proclaim too, and through their stories, we get to see who Jesus is in a new way.

I want you to put yourself in this gospel story. We have Nathanael, Peter, Andrew, and John the Baptist. Think for a second. **Who do you identify with?**

Do you come to Jesus with questions, like Nathanael?

Did you come to Jesus because someone you trusted told you about him, like Peter did after his brother talked with him?

Were you walking down a different path, then saw Jesus and knew you needed a change, like Andrew?

Or have you been waiting for someone like Jesus, someone to save you, like John the Baptist had, and so you knew him when you saw him?

Or maybe none of these characters seem quite like you. After all, they are in a very different situation than we are. If that's the case, **think about what brought you here this morning.** Why did you come and see today?

Because the God who calls us to come and see is also the God who made us, who formed our inward parts, and that God knows our differences. To come and see on a Sunday morning for you might not mean encountering Jesus in the words of a story, like it does for me. It might mean entering into a space with your body and heart and mind where you can think about who God is. It might mean encountering the Spirit as we pray or sing. It might mean seeing God in other people as we gather together in community. It might mean hearing God as we speak our prayers aloud together. We don't all come to worship to see or experience the same thing, but we come together anyway. We might not always know what we're doing, but we come together anyway, and that is the beginning of faith.

Now, next week, Reverend Sue is going to talk about what it means to come and follow, which means I'll leave all the concrete actions for her. Let me leave you this week with this: God saw Nathanael under

the fig tree. If the psalmist is right, God saw all of us under our own fig trees, before we ever knew God for ourselves. Our first step, no matter how or why we made it, was to come and see. Some days, it's the only step that we can take. On the days when we're tired, or unsure, or too burdened to remember why we do what we do, I want you to remember the words of Jesus, the words of the God who sees us no matter where we are and meets us there: Come and see.

Come and see.

Come and see.

Amen.

Now, we're going to move into a time of reflection and confession and I want to do something a little different, using the hymn Be Thou My Vision, which is #451 in the red book.

God asks us to come and see and sometimes we can't. Sometimes there are things in our lives and in our hearts that we are responsible for and that keep us from coming to God. This hymn acknowledges that in its words—as we sing, we ask God to be our vision and the heart of our own heart. We need God to do this work in us because we cannot do it for ourselves.

I'm going to ask Rose to play through the hymn twice while we reflect on what is stopping us from coming to God and confess those things to God, and then we'll join together in singing all three verses.