

Grace Episcopal Church

November 25, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell

"Come and See"

Text - John 1: 29-42

For a long, long time, years even, there were two words that struck fear into my heart when they were applied to religion and church. No, they weren't "judgment" or "apocalypse." Not even "sin." The scary words were: "witness" and "testimony."

In everyday language, we generally think of these in a legal sense. Witness means to see something happen, and testify means to tell the truth about what was seen. In the religious sense, the two words become almost inter-changeable – they are both about the telling. And it's not so much about telling what is seen with one's own eyes as it is telling about beliefs or about an experience of God's presence.

Now, what can possibly be scary about that? We know that without witness and testimony to Jesus' message and ministry, Christianity would not have flourished. We would not be here in this place today. We also know that the Bible commands us to carry the Good News to all corners of the earth. And, actually, two of our people gave wonderful testimonies these past weeks! Not scary at all!

The problem for many of us is that these words bring back unpleasant memories of zealous persons with well-thumbed Bibles witnessing to Christ. Asking if we have been "saved." Insisting on one particular set of beliefs. My own discomfort came out of specific events that were harmful – or at least disrespectful to the beliefs and practices of myself and others. And through the years, I've found that I am not alone in this. A number of people have felt damaged as I did and have come to be leery of witness and testimony – of evangelism – because we equate it with this kind of pressure to be forced into one mold. Some have even come to view the church itself with suspicion.

These are not isolated experiences, of course. Very recent surveys have shown that a huge percentage of those who do not regularly attend church view churches as judgmental, rigid, and close-minded to beliefs other than their own. This makes some of us cringe! "Why don't they know that all churches are not like that?" we cry. "Why is only this one message being heard?" "Why don't they come and see?"

"Come and see." That phrase has to do with St. Andrew. Not in our reading this morning – the Gospels of Matthew and Mark have very abbreviated stories of Jesus calling the first disciples. It is in John's gospel that Andrew gets a teeny bit more than a passing nod. So, I will exercise a bit of license here. "Come and see" is how Jesus responded to John's disciples who asked him where he was staying. This happened just a day after the baptism scene at the

Jordan River where John the Baptist testified to his witness of the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus. John points out Jesus – this one whose shoes he is not fit to tie, this one who will baptize with the spirit – to his own disciples and they turn and follow.

When Jesus notices that these guys are trailing after him, he asks them what they are looking for. Their answer is another question, “Where are you staying?” And Jesus invites them to “come and see.” They go, they see, and then, we’re told, they stay. We’re not told that Jesus quizzes them about their beliefs or lays out a program for them. It is just a simple, gentle invitation to “come and see.”

The story doesn’t end there, of course. Andrew was so excited by what he saw, that he immediately ran out to tell his brother Simon Peter. And if we read a few more verses beyond those the lectionary gave us today, we find that Philip does the same thing. Philip follows Jesus, then goes off and finds his friend, Nathaniel, and says, “come and see.” And so it goes, one person after another, growing the circle around Jesus, rippling outward in wider and wider rings as they share what has deeply touched and excited them and invite others in.

What a model Jesus gives us! Invitation, not pressure. Inspiration, not demand. Granted, the challenge for us is a little different than it was for the disciples. We do not have the possibility of going to the banks of the Jordan River or to the hills of Galilee to see Jesus with our own eyes, hear him with our own ears. We must rely on the testimony handed down to us by the cloud of witnesses that went before – those who knew Jesus “in person,” those who knew somebody who knew Jesus, those who gathered the stories into scripture, those who studied and interpreted and made meaning, and on and on all the way down to us. To people like you and me who carry the story forward and try to discern how it continues to inform us in this very different time and place.

One commentator on this text said that the words “come and see” reveal the fantasy life of clergy:

“inspired by excellent worship, and even more our excellent preaching,” he says, “our people will leave church making all kinds of connections between their faith and their everyday lives, want to share their faith with their friends, and invite those friends to church.”

He claims that the reason this is just a fantasy is not just that we fear being seen as pushy or offensive when we try to share our faith. It is because we don’t feel competent. We haven’t learned to talk about our faith, let alone share it: I would add that some of us learned to keep our faith experiences as private matters. And that some don’t even recognize faith experiences at all – or God’s presence in their lives. Because these things haven’t been talked about or shared.

And yet, there are those among us who yearn to grow in faith, to deepen their relationships with God. There are those who think they don’t know how to pray or that they are “dumb” about the Bible or our Christian tradition and, therefore, hesitant to join a study group. And

there are those who struggle with illness or grief or other life issues who might like to understand them within the context of faith.

What better way to address these needs than to share our ordinary stories, our experiences, our lives and our failures with each other? How better to build the community than to see and hear, to tell, and to invite? Not to coerce or pressure—just to share the joy and the struggle. Sharing stories of faith in ways that inspire, that connect us, and open us to seeing God working among us and through one another. For you see, God works through us. We learn from each other.

This is why I am excited about our planning for formation here at Grace. The intent of formation is far, far removed from trying to shape us into one mold of “right” belief. Nor is it simply memorizing Bible verses, reciting the catechism, or even attending classes taught by experts. Those things have their place, I suppose. This, though, is about engaging our whole selves—mind, heart, and soul—together with others in prayer, dialog and reflection on scripture, on church tradition, and on major life questions. Enriching our own lives and the life of our community and giving us the confidence to invite others to join in our journey, to “come and see” what we have found meaningful.

We must remember that the message we carry is not always good tidings of comfort and joy. The Good News is that, of course, but the story of God’s hope for God’s creation is often a hard message. Both here within our own community and beyond into the world.

It is hard to imagine what the world would be like today had some not taken risks to speak truth in love—to proclaim the vision of God’s realm where all would be treated as God’s children. But this work is not done. And this is our job. It was the disciples’ job in a region under Roman occupation. It is our job in a world that fears acts of terror, that cannot figure out how to provide basic human necessities and just treatment for all people, that cannot even manage to find ways to respect and honor those of other faiths, political views, or life perspectives. It has been the job of prophets like John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. Of the movers and shakers who make visible and lasting contributions like Simon Peter and Mother Theresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr. And of ordinary people like Andrew—like you and me.

We know, through our celebration today, that Andrew, the ordinary brother who appears only briefly in the Gospels, became a saint. He is the patron saint not only of Scotland but of Russia, Barbados, Ukraine, and Romania. and covers fishmongers, golf, singers and performers, gout, sore throats, spinsters, maidens, and women wishing to become mothers. But what we remember is how he heard John the Baptist’s testimony, accepted Jesus’ invitation to “come and see,” and then went out to bring back his brother Simon Peter who became a key player both in Jesus’ earthly ministry and in the beginnings of the church.

Look back at our collect for St. Andrew’s day:

Almighty God, who gave such grace to your apostle Andrew that he readily obeyed the

call of your Son Jesus Christ, and brought his brother with him: Give us who are called by your Holy Word, grace to follow him without delay and to bring those near to us into his gracious presence...

May we do so. Come and see! Come and see! Then, go forth and invite!

Amen and amen.