

Come and See

TEXT: John 1:35-51

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on June 1, 2025

Whenever the sermon text springs from John's gospel, I like to begin with a reminder that John plays by its own rules. Biblical scholars call Matthew, Mark, and Luke the "synoptic gospels," with the word "synoptic" meaning "to see the same" or "to see together." Matthew, Mark, and Luke each have their own agendas, but they share a bunch of the same material, some of which has identical language. The first three gospels also tend to include their stories in much the same order.

John's gospel, on the other hand, is like that one child who is just "different." We can see that just in comparing the Christmas stories. Mark's gospel isn't interested there at all and has no birth narrative. Nothing. Mark wants to get down to business and begins with John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness. But Matthew, Luke, and John want to start at the beginning. Matthew alone tells us about Joseph's dream and the three kings. Luke alone tells us about the shepherds and angels. But they both tell us about Mary's engagement to Joseph, the Holy Spirit conceiving a child in Mary's womb, and the wonders and challenges that come from all that.

But while Matthew and Luke are constructing the Nativity scenes as we know them, John is off in a corner contemplating the nature of the universe.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." ... "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." ... "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

I skipped over some parts of that section that talk about John the Baptist, but what I just read, which is known in Bible Study circles as John's "prologue," is John's total lack of interest in the struggles of Mary and Joseph at Jesus' conception and birth, or in describing any of the other trappings we associate—and often fight over—about Christmas.

Instead, John is laser-focused on who he believed Jesus was and the fact that—by whatever means and under whatever circumstances, "The word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." "No one has ever seen God," John proclaims. And that, the prologue tells us, is what Jesus allows us to do—to see with our own eyes God's glory, the true light that has, astonishingly, come into the world.

John's prologue, in John 1:1-18 is the Cliffs' Notes version of John's Gospel. It tells you both what John wants us to take away from the stories that follow and it introduces the themes and metaphors John will use to point us to the truths he presents in the prologue.

It also gives us a heads up that we need to read John's gospel with a different lens than we use when reading the other three. The others are storytellers. They tell their stories in a similar way, even when including different details for their own audiences and purposes, and they are interested in helping people know what Jesus said and did and the contours of his life. Like Jesus in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's

Sermon on the Plain, the first three gospels are generally for the masses who have never heard the story. When someone comes to me totally unfamiliar with the life and stories of Jesus, I send them to read Luke.

But John's purpose is not to infuse us with the stories of Jesus. John spells out his own agenda at the end of his account of Easter, in the next to the last chapter, right after the story we have come to call "Doubting Thomas." After that story, John writes in chapter 20:30-31:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

In other words, John is writing for those who are already disciples but who are struggling—as Thomas was—to understand what that meant, especially with Jesus now physically gone; those who are struggling to believe what John has told us about Jesus in the prologue and what he hopes will be proven by the particular signs, sayings, and stories of Jesus that he includes in the rest of his gospel. John's gospel has more unique material than any of the other three, and reading it is like searching for clues in a mystery novel, or interpreting a dream, or excavating an archaeological site.

If I ask you to observe a particular grove of trees, we will all see trees. But if I tell you that there's a rare bird that lives only in that particular grove; or that it's rumored that a pirate once buried treasure under the oldest tree; or that this grove alone was spared by loggers because the tribe indigenous to the area told of miracle healings if you spent the night alone in the grove in the rain—with any of those added details, you're not as likely to be content just looking from a distance or merely hearing a tour guide talk about the history of the grove.

Most people will find it at least interesting, if not compelling, to actually enter the grove and take a closer look themselves. "Hmmm...maybe I'll see the bird! Which one is the oldest tree?" John's gospel is the grove; and John's prologue has the details about why the grove is worth our time to study. And the invitation of his gospel, at both the beginning and the end, is to "come and see" whether the claims of the prologue might just be true.

The prologue tells us that John will use the metaphors of light and dark to represent truth and ignorance—metaphors that are often represented in the stories he chooses by physical eyesight and blindness. It also tells us that flesh—the body—is a critical part of what makes Jesus special. The prologue tips us off that the whole gospel will focus on Jesus' identity.

It's not just that Jesus is God. The gospel, as John tells it, is that Jesus is God *in the flesh*. That's far more important to God's saving work in John than whether or not Jesus was born of a virgin or whether he was a descendant of King David. The Word becoming flesh is all John cares that we hear.

Since John's gospel is primarily for those who are already in some way disciples—those who know the basic story, are intrigued enough to follow him, but are still struggling with how and what to believe about him—John has a strong preference for stories connected to Jesus' disciples.

Right after the prologue, but still in chapter one, John backs up his testimony about who Jesus is with John the Baptist's proclamation about who Jesus is and who John the Baptist is in relation to that. The story of Jesus' baptism is here, which is again totally focused on Jesus' identity; but also on having that identity confirmed by something that can be seen. John the Baptist tells the crowd in chapter 1:32-34

"And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

John the Baptist has seen and believed, and the next section is what Neil just read to us. It's disciple-focused. John the Baptist is with two of his own disciples when Jesus walks by. John tells his disciples, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" Both of John's disciples, walk off, leave John in the dust, and follow Jesus.

Jesus now has a couple extra people tagging along and he asked them, "What are you looking for?" They ask only where he's staying and Jesus invites them to "Come and see," and we're told that they "came and saw." Notice all the looking and seeing involved there.

As it turns out, one of those former disciples of John the Baptist was Andrew, Peter's brother. Andrew is impressed and goes out to bring Peter to Jesus. Jesus then heads to Galilee where a similar thing plays out when Jesus calls Philip to follow him and Philip goes and finds his friend Nathanael. Nathanael and Philip, being native to the Galilee area, know Nazareth and its reputation as a small, poor, non-descript town.

So when Philip says he's following Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth, Nathanael asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" This time it is Philip who answers the question by saying, "Come and see." When he does, Jesus declares that Nathanael is a man in whom there is no deceit, and Nathanael's response is "Where did you come to know me?" Jesus answers that he *saw* Nathanael under the fig tree before Philip called him.

For John, to see is to know. Do you want to understand Jesus? To know Jesus? Come and see. But also, because Jesus is the Word made flesh, once we come, we find that Jesus already knows us; because Jesus has already seen us. The prologue has told us that Jesus is the true light, which enlightens everyone and that, in becoming flesh, God's glory could finally be seen. God already knows us, but in Jesus, we can finally know God, if we are willing to come and see.

At the other end of the gospel story, in the resurrection narrative in John 20, when Jesus sees Mary Magdalene in the garden weeping, he asks her who she is looking for. Once Jesus reveals himself by speaking her name, she returns and announces to the other disciples, "I have seen the Lord." That evening Jesus appears to most of the other disciples, he shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. We're told, "Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

Thomas was absent from that gathering and the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas has not seen and won't believe them. A week goes by and he's gathered with the others when Jesus appears again. Jesus knows already what is needed and invites Thomas, unasked, not only to see his hands and side but also to touch. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Then John tells us that the purpose of the book is exactly that—to provide signs so that those who see them might come to believe.

The typical calling of Jesus to his disciples in the narrative gospels is "Follow me," which was exactly what the disciples of every rabbi of the day did. For weeks or months or sometimes years, Jewish men put themselves under the authority of a rabbi to learn their ways and deepen their faith; and they literally followed their rabbi everywhere he went.

There were rules set by each rabbi for their own disciples, and the disciples committed to obedience. They were free to leave at any time, but to continue being a disciple, they had to follow and obey. They could question the rabbi, but not argue. They were there to learn. When they had learned enough, they could end their discipleship entirely or move to someone else, which is what the two disciples of John the Baptist do when John essentially tells them that Jesus is way more important than he is.

John's gospel does have some "follow me," language. That's the formal language of invitation to discipleship. But here in the first calling of disciples in John, before they give up everything to follow, they are invited to "come and see," to open their eyes and see things in the light of Jesus. Then they can better decide whether following him is really what they want to do.

Come and see what this life looks like; step into the light and see. And if you can't trust your eyes, reach out and touch—see with your hands. Notice the signs, sit in the grove of trees until your eyes adjust to the light and you notice what is actually around you. Until we've been able to do that, we can't make an informed decision—not about following Jesus, but also not about anything, really. So much of what is broken in our world right now is due to our unwillingness to actually go and see the truth for ourselves.

In seventh grade, I met the girl who would become my best friend. She had been in Catholic school through the sixth grade and then moved to public school the year we met. I still remember the look of terror on her face when she realized that her new best friend was one of those Protestants that the nuns had always warned her about! I was baptized when I was eleven and wanted her to come. She did, but she was truly frightened that something awful might happen to her by attending a service in a Protestant church. But out of love for me, she was willing to “come and see.”

For my part, as she not only abandoned her Catholic upbringing but kicked all religion to the curb, she then frightened me. I was convinced that she was going to hell if she didn't come inside my bubble. And I prayed and gave her tracts and tried to pull her in. My bubble at the time said God would have no place for her, which broke my heart.

But my love for her taught me that my bubble was simply not big or flexible enough—it had reflected light, but if it had no room for her, it was not the true light, which loved everyone. So, I also became willing to “come and see” where she found meaning and joy in life. And we are still best friends 55 years later. My first book, *Blowing the Lid Off the God-Box*, is dedicated to her.

What John's gospel adds to our understanding of how Jesus called his first disciples, and therefore how God calls us still today, is that while the call to “Follow me” is a call to obedience to the way of life shown to us by Jesus, that call is not a demand but an invitation.

We actually have one example in the Bible of someone who received that exact invitation and said no—the rich young ruler. That refusal made Jesus sad, but the young man was not struck by lightning for turning away, and Jesus doesn't chase after him to beg him to change his mind or threaten him with hell.

Discipleship is never coerced by Jesus—not by physical force, not by guilt or manipulation or anything else. It's voluntary, and costly in ways that might not be immediately apparent to those who are just passing by. In fact, Jesus encourages his disciples, including us, to check out what it will take and what will be asked of us before we accept—to poke our heads out from the bubble of what we think we know, and what we think following Jesus means, to see with our own eyes what it's really all about.

John tells us in his prologue that what we will see in Jesus is light that will reveal grace and truth. Artificial light can mislead us from a distance. So, before you blindly follow, go and see. Are you allowed to get close enough to see for yourself? Close enough to touch the wounds that even those risen from the dead still carry from having followed that way? By that light do you see grace? Do you see truth? That is the true light. Come and see. Amen.