

Second Sunday After Epiphany
Year A, RCL
January 19, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Gospel:
John 1:29-42

Peached only at HT, not Redeemer

John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." 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."

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

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During the first few months of my arrival on the North Fork, almost three years ago, with a mandate from the Bishop to jump start, not one, but two Episcopal churches, I fully immersed myself in the revitalization process – learning everything I could about the two communities, introducing myself to everyone I thought I needed to know, arranging and leading small group meetings, running from one place to another, holding four worship services on Sunday morning. I was energized by the task, but at the same time, I was a little overwhelmed with the responsibility I felt to warrant the confidence that had been placed in me.

In those days I frequently talked with my friend and mentor, Dennis Campbell, who at one time was the Canon for Congregational Development and my principle advisor. Realizing the pace at which I was operating and sensing the burden I had placed on myself, Dennis chuckled and said, "Roger, I have good news for you. The Messiah has come!" He paused for a few seconds to allow me to absorb the significance of that news and then said, "And he is not you."

I have to wonder if John the Baptist didn't feel a sense of relief upon encountering Jesus, seeing the spirit descend on him like a dove from heaven, and realizing that this man he had baptized in the River Jordan, was the true "lamb of God." John had been wandering in the wilderness and emerged preaching, teaching, urging repentance, and baptizing. And while fulfilling his mission he became aware that people were looking to him for answers. John the Baptist's encounter with the "anointed one" made it plain that it wasn't all about him. John was merely there to point the way.

The people had begun looking to John for answers, when in truth, John and his disciples didn't even know what questions to ask. After John testified that Jesus was the Son of God, the disciples immediately followed Jesus, and Jesus turned to them and asked, "What are you looking for?" The disciples' reply is a classic non sequitur. They were face to face with God incarnate. They could have asked about the nature of reality, inquired about the meaning of life, or simply asked, "Why are we here?" But with all of life's burning questions they might have posed, what came out of their mouths was, "Where are you staying?"

Perhaps I shouldn't be so hard on John's disciples. In an encounter with the Christ, we might not do any better. I can imagine that we too might avoid bringing up life's real issues and simply ask Jesus if he is staying at the Riverhead Marriott. We are so often caught up with the trivial, that we lose sight of what is truly important.

Ann Lamott tells the story of a sparrow lying in the street with its legs straight up in the air, straining. A warhorse walks up to the sparrow, and says, "What on earth are you doing?" The sparrow replies, "I heard the sky was falling, and I wanted to help." The warhorse sneers--"Do you really think you're going to hold back the sky, with those scrawny little legs?" And the sparrow says, "One does what one can."

That's all we are called to do. We can't save the world. It often feels like the sky is falling and we are on our backs with our scrawny little legs in the air, keeping it all at bay. We are only called to do so much, but we are called to do what we can. We are called to help make the world a better place, with whatever resources we have.

The Israeli violinist Yitzhak Perlman contracted polio at the age of 4. Ever since, he has had to wear metal braces on his legs and walk with crutches, yet he became one of the world's great violinists. One evening he came out onto the stage at a concert to play a violin concerto. Laying down his crutches, he placed the violin under his chin and began tuning the instrument when, with a loud snap, one of the strings broke. The audience sat in silence, expecting him to ask for another string, but instead he signaled the conductor to begin, and he proceeded to play the entire concerto with only three strings. At the end of the performance

the audience gave him a standing ovation and called on him to speak. What he said, so the story goes, was this: "Our task is to make music with what remains."

We have all experienced brokenness. It's an unavoidable part of the human condition. The question is whether or not we can continue to make music, despite our brokenness. We may not know how, and we may not feel up to the task. My guess is that these disciples of John, these would be Jesus followers, were broken, inadequate people as well, trying to make music with only three strings. Their inability to overcome their brokenness on their own, probably had something to do with their willingness to drop everything and to follow Jesus.

Patently acknowledging the disciples' inquiry about where he was staying, Jesus answered, "Come and see." That's our invitation as well.

In a sermon perhaps already overburdened with images, I want to leave you with one more. John the Baptist says of Jesus, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." Ornithologically speaking, doves and pigeons are genetically almost identical. We tend to call the larger, sometimes domesticated birds pigeons and the smaller one's doves. In imagining the Spirit descending like a bird, it is likely that the writer of John's gospel had in mind the pigeons that were commonly used in temple sacrifice. The poor man, who could not afford to offer a lamb, might offer a pigeon to be sacrificed. So imagine, if you will, not a dove, but a pigeon, the sacrifice of the poor, alighting on the head of the Christ, assisting the Holy Spirit in the anointing of the chosen one. And so it is not surprising that the spirit of the poor abides with Jesus and remains with him throughout his ministry.

And so it is that at what is perhaps the most mystical moment we encounter in Holy Scripture, we find ourselves brought down to earth by the lowly sacrifice of the poor. Such, I think, is the place where we are called to abide – fully grounded in the world and trying to make it a better place for all God's creation and yet always remaining mindful of the presence of spirit.