

Second Sunday After The Epiphany – 2023

Isaiah 49:1-7

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42a

How many of y'all have ever had someone say to you: "If I could just see it with my own eyes, I would totally believe?" I've heard that – numerous times. When folks say it they aren't being snarky, they aren't challenging me and my faith, they aren't being adamant that they will never even consider believing. What they *are* saying is that their eyes, the necessity of them directly witnessing something miraculous, something supernatural, their eyes are the condition that they have established as a gateway to faith. "If I could see something that would confirm Christianity, if I could see a miracle, if I could see the Lord's pierced hands, witness His resurrection, if He would appear to me – then I'd believe."

Reports are that Christianity is diminishing in the United States, in Western Europe. I don't disbelieve the reports but I have no real way to corroborate them. I can definitely tell that Christian influence is losing its former place in our society. That is unfortunate. Churchmen are looking for solutions. Some advocate diluting the Gospel, diluting the Word of God to make it more palatable to this present age. Some want the church to reflect the movement of the society around us on cultural issues. This is being backed by those who genuinely desire to see unbelievers come to the knowledge of the truth, to receive by faith the gift of Christ's righteousness. But it's a slippery slope, don't you think? Will the culture around us continue to change, going from bad to worse? Is God's Word – the truth of God's revelation both in Holy Scripture and in the person of His Son – is God's Word capable of bringing people to faith regardless of the culture around them?

John the Baptist didn't adopt any funky sales pitch. He didn't traffic in any bait and switch tactics, any promotional give-aways, or any theological doubletalk. "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (John 1:34). Super direct, don't you think? You are looking for the Messiah? There He is! How many of y'all, by the way, need your sins borne away? Do you think that you are alone in this? God forgiving a sinner is the most universal and personal discussion that you could have with someone, anyone. Every single human being needs their sin taken away and only One can do it – there He is, that's Him. "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." In His flesh, the Son of God bears sin away into His death. He and He alone dispatches the sin of every man, every woman, every boy, and every girl. How does He do it? He does it by hanging on a cross and being flooded, inundated, swamped with every evil, every consequence of the fall, every disease and all the fullness of death itself. True God and true man, in one person; He *alone* can accomplish this task.

And John points Him out – there He is, that's the One, Him shall you follow and cling to and believe in and imitate and herald. John's voice is now in the church's throat. I'm not inviting you to a big head, but that is you, individually and all of us corporately: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." One of the things that is needed in our era is plain spoken Christians who are charitable, kind, but who put words in the plainest form. We follow Jesus. Not in an abstract way, as if from a distance by adopting a few choice Scripture passages

or by hanging an inspirational plaque on our wall. We follow Christ because He dwells among us and ministers to us with His Spirit, His grace, His death and His resurrection. We follow Christ the King in season and out of season, when the culture waves palm branches as His name is mentioned and when the culture yells for Him to be crucified. Why? Why do we follow Him in season and out of season? I can answer that by quoting a bumper sticker.

The bumper sticker reads: “The worst day fishing is better than the best day at work.” The worst day as a Christian is better than the best day as an unbeliever. Christ is our rock, our fortress our refuge and our strength. He never leaves us, never forsakes us. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). He is here. The first, best thing that a Christian does is go to church; the crucified and risen King is here which is precisely why we are here. He said this: “Where I am there my servant will be also” (John 12:26). “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). As our processional crucifix makes its way from the rear of the nave to the chancel it is as though John the Baptist is saying to all gathered in this Divine Service: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Does that not cheer your heart? God with us; does that not comfort your spirit, strengthen your hope, give helium to your soul. *Anyone* who comes here, **anyone** who you bring here, encounters the Lord Christ and all of His beauty, all of His forgiving love.

Those disciples who left John and followed Jesus, they drew our Lord’s attention and He asked them directly: “What are you seeking?” How about you? What would you say to Him? What are you seeking? Truth? Revelation? Divine presence in your life, a foundation upon which you can base your actions, your outlook and be confident that God is with you? I have to admit, my life has been charmed. Being the pastor of this congregation has been an extraordinary blessing – not the smallest reason is because this place is overflowing with faithful Christians. Do you realize what a blessing it is to be surrounded by faithful believers, humble, loving, and true? There is no guarantee that Christianity will flourish in America. Are we prepared to follow Christ regardless of what the future brings? What are you seeking?

The disciples said: Rabbi, where are you staying? It wasn’t a polite question about Jesus’ accommodations. “Where are you *remaining*” is a better translation. “Where are you remaining?” You know what this means. In the Gospel of John, where Jesus remains are the places where He has located Himself, the places where we find Him in the NT era. “If you remain in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31). We say these next two things in concert. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We know where He is staying; come and you will see. Bring them to this place. He reveals Himself here, through His Word, and His hearers have an epiphany. The eyes of their hearts are opened by God’s Word, God’s Spirit and they know the truth and the truth sets people free. What are we prisoner to? Worry, insecurity, addiction, loneliness, depression, guilt, shame, fear. Christ sets us free. Not by some empty pep talk, not by some highfalutin moralizing – He sets us free by His death and resurrection. We are His disciples. We adopt His manner of living. We cherish His Word and we hold it above every other teaching. We are exalted in His teaching. We are lifted up by God and His love and we are lifted up by His Word, His voice, His presence.

The path that we are on leads somewhere. The path of discipleship leads to heaven. We know the way (John 14:6). The eyes of our hearts have been enlightened and we see the crucified King in the Lord's Supper, we taste forgiveness full and free. He remains there for us. Jesus prepared this place for us. His altar, His pulpit, His baptismal font, His lectern – He abides with us here, remains with us here, serves us here, shepherds us here, leads us to heaven here. Let me tell you something about your church, this congregation and the Christian church throughout the world. Andrew told His brother: "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41). That's what the church does in every age. Now is so ripe. "Andrew brought him to Jesus" (John 1:42). Christ's church is alive and well. To Him be glory forever and ever.