

2nd Sunday after the Epiphany

Text: John 1:29-42

Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.

January 20, 2008

“Behold, the Lamb of God”

Here is that great preacher of the wilderness, John the Baptist, dressed in a garment made of camel's hair and girded with a leather belt, surviving in that desolate place on locusts and wild honey, and devoting himself to warning his generation of the wrath that is yet to come, saw Jesus coming toward him to be baptized and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!"

Now we are use to hearing this proclamation by John. But this proclamation comes even before Jesus had begun his ministry is unique to the Gospel of John. Jesus at this point had performed no miracles, called no disciples, raised on one from the dead. He is still fresh from the carpenter shop. He hasn't made any enemies yet, issued no controversial teachings or ruffled any royal feathers. Any comparison to the Paschal Lamb sacrificed for the sins of the people at this point is a bit premature. Here's this crazy guy out in the wilderness saying that the person coming toward him is going to save the people from their sins!?! Is this really the person Jesus wants as his Campaign Manager?

Bill Bryson traveled to Hannibal, Missouri, to visit the boyhood home of author, Mark Twain. The house was a "trim, white-washed house with green shutters, set in the middle of downtown." It cost two dollars to walk around the site. Bryson found the house to be a disappointment. "It claimed to be a faithful reproduction of the original interiors," he writes, "but there were wires and water sprinklers clumsily evident in every room. I also very much doubt that young Samuel Clemens' bedroom had Armstrong vinyl on the floor or that his sister's bedroom had a plywood partition in it."

The house is owned by the city of Hannibal and attracts 135,000 visitors each year. Bryson was disappointed that he wasn't able to actually go inside the house. "You look through the windows," he says. At each window there is a recorded message telling you about each room. As he proceeded from window to window he asked another tourist. "What do you think of it?" The friendly stranger replied, "Oh, I think it's great. I come here whenever I'm in Hannibal" two, three times a year. Sometimes I go out of my way to come here." A little confused, Bryson replied, "Really?" "Yeah," answered the stranger. "I must have been here twenty, thirty times by now. This is a real shrine, you know." They walked and talked some more. Bryson's last question to the man was, "Would you say the house is just like Twain described it in his books?"

"I don't know," the stranger said. "I've never read one of his books." Visiting his shrine " but ignoring his books. There are many followers of Jesus who are satisfied with that same superficial approach. They visit his shrine, but never read his teachings. Shouldn't we get to know Jesus, not just as an interesting historical figure, but as the living Son of God.

How DO we find Jesus? Sometimes we find Jesus through a dramatic act of revelation. It doesn't happen that way to many of us, but sometimes God breaks into people's lives in a clear, unmistakable act of disclosure. That's what happened to John the Baptist. At first, John didn't even recognize Jesus. Even though they were cousins, he didn't really know who Jesus was until the day Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized. That's when the heavens opened and the Spirit descended like a dove and rested on Jesus.

Sometimes it happens that way. Something dramatic happens and our lives are transformed. But most of us have not come to know Jesus in such a dramatic way as seeing the heavens open up with a direct sign from God. Most of us learned about Jesus through the witness of others. A day later, John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching and exclaims, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Two of John's followers hear John's witness, and they begin to follow Jesus not because of any dramatic vision they had, but because they trusted John.

My guess is that this is the way most of us came to Christ " through the witness of others. It may have been our parents or our spouse a friend or a strong personality who made an indelible impression on us, but somewhere along the way the witness of someone else made the critical difference in our lives.

Tomorrow we observe the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His life was an attempt to live the type of life he felt Jesus would want him to live. Two months before his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta about his death in what would oddly enough become his eulogy. He said: "Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral. If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards, that's not important. I'd like someone to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like someone to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to be able to say that I did try to visit those in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."

Dr. King concluded with these words: "I won't have any money left behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind." Did Martin Luther King, Jr. have that level of commitment when he first began his ministry? It's doubtful. He had youthful enthusiasm to be sure. He had strong convictions. He was well brought up, with an outstanding Baptist preacher as a father. But people who are truly captured by the spirit of Christ do so generally after years of walking in Christ's footsteps.

Our faith is validated and grows as we "come and see." Most of us have been raised in

the church. There never has been that one moment when the heavens opened and we saw the spirit descend. Yet we have walked with Jesus almost since we took our first tiny steps as small children. Our faith is just as real as those who have more dramatic stories to tell. Regardless of how we found Christ, our task is to provide the kind of witness that others may find him too. Do you do that by telling your story of Faith? Or do you do that by giving all your money to feed the hungry and clothe the naked? Or do you do that - like Martin Luther King, Jr. did in visiting those who are in prison?

Let me tell you a story about Hans. In the early 1900s, a German named Herr von Osten trained his horse Hans to count by tapping his front hoof. Apparently Hans was a quick learner, because von Osten soon had him performing amazing feats in front of paying audiences. Hans demonstrated a talent for adding, subtracting, dividing, and performing complex mathematical calculations. He was even able to count the number of people in a room or the number of people wearing eyeglasses. As his fame grew, he became known as Clever Hans, the smartest horse in the world. But there were doubters. Some accused von Osten of deceiving the public by using trickery and sleight of hand to make money. They demanded proof of Hans' mathematical abilities. The first test the doubters came up with involved calculating numbers that were randomly selected on stage by people other than von Osten. Using his hoof, Hans pounded out the correct answers every time. Some of the doubters started to believe that the horse was indeed a mathematical genius.

Then came the second test. In this one, one person whispered a number in Hans's left ear and another person whispered a number in his right ear. Hans was told to add the two numbers and pound out the answer. He couldn't do it. On further investigation, it was found that Hans could solve problems only if someone he could see knew the answer. When Hans was given numbers and asked to compute them, spectators leaned forward and tensed their bodies as Hans began tapping his hoof. When Hans had tapped the correct number, onlookers relaxed their body postures and nodded their heads, which was Hans's signal to stop tapping.

Hans was indeed clever not because he could calculate, but because he could read human body language! Clever Hans could figure out the correct answers to complex mathematical equations simply by watching people. If someone were watching us that closely, what would they discover? Specifically, what would they discover about following Christ?

You don't have to say a word about following Christ to let people know what kind of difference he's made in your life. All you have to do is live. As St. Francis of Assisi once said: "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." Our actions, body language, and nonverbal communication often do the talking for us. And when our actions contradict our words, our actions win out every time.

The question has been asked, "If you were arrested for being a follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" It's sad, but many Christians betray Jesus not with their

words but with their disobedience. So it's not enough to just come see the Shrine, or attend a weekly worship service, or put in an offering envelope, or remember someone in our prayers. Yes - we need to do these things but we also need to read the book - live the life - allow the Spirit of God to descend upon our hearts - And then say "Here I am Lord! Use me!"

John the Baptist said, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and people responded to his witness because of his conviction. God used John the Baptist. God used the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And - God uses US! Amen!