

“Come and See”
John 1:35-46
2nd Sunday after Epiphany

January 14, 2024
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

This morning is the second week of our sermon series, “The Fabric of Faith,” a series in which we are exploring the different ways that scripture describes what it means to have faith:

faith as patience,
faith as friendship,
faith as fear of the Lord...

Those are in the weeks to come.

Our topic today is faith as SEEING.

What we see,
and don't see,
and what Jesus wants us to see...

Speaking of things we don't always see, there is a running joke in our household about how I will periodically, out of the blue, shout out to whoever happens to be within hearing distance:

Where's the ____?
Where's the leash for the dog? It's not where I left it.
I can't find remote for the tv! Where's the remote?

Or I'll open the refrigerator and say,
“I can't find the salsa, where's the salsa?”

And invariably, my wife will come over and she'll stand at the refrigerator door and she'll look at me and she'll look at the door, and she'll point to the salsa...that is RIGHT THERE, in the door, tucked behind the mayonnaise...in other words, right in front of my face.

Well...someone must have moved it since the last time I put it in there...

I don't think I'm alone in this.

Does this happen to anyone else?

You don't have to admit it, it's fine.

I'm just wondering...have you ever failed to see something that was right in front of you before?

There's a marvelous story from WWII, when the U.S. military sought to make their planes as bullet-proof as possible. To do this, the military looked at the bombers that had returned from enemy territory. And they recorded where those planes had taken the most damage.

Over and over again, they saw that the bullet holes tended to accumulate along the wings, and around the tail gunner, and down the center of the body.

Wings. Body. Tail gunner.

Naturally, the commanders wanted to put the thicker protection where they could clearly see the damage, where the holes tended to cluster.

But [statistician Abraham] Wald said no, that would be precisely the wrong decision. Putting the armor where the holes were visible would not improve their chances at all.

The mistake, which Wald saw instantly, was that the holes showed where the planes were the strongest. The holes showed where a bomber could be shot and still survive the flight home, Wald explained.

After all, here they were, holes and all.

It was **the planes that weren't there** that needed extra protection, and they had needed it in places where the planes that made it back were not hit. The holes in the surviving planes actually revealed the locations that needed *the least additional armor*.

Look at where the survivors are unharmed, Wald said, and that's where these bombers are most vulnerable; that's where the planes that did NOT make it back...were hit.¹

Have you ever failed to see something that was right in front of you before?

Our topic today is faith—
 as what we see,
 and what we don't see,
 and what Jesus wants us to see...

And there is no one in the New Testament who works this theme of faith as SIGHT...more than the Gospel writer John.

Do you remember how John begins?

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

When darkness is all around you, what does light allow you to do?
 It allows you to see.

It our text for today, Jesus notices Andrew and his brother, Simon, following him.

¹ This story was told in an article entitled “Fixing What’s (Not?) Broken” by Mary Ann McKibben Dana, May 29, 2013, at www.nextchurch.net.

And Jesus says to them: “What are you looking for?”

These are the first words that Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John.
It’s a question about sight.
A question about vision.

Andrew and Simon Peter respond:
“Rabbi, where are you staying?”

To which Jesus replies: “Come and see.”
Come and see...

These are important words in John’s Gospel.
They serve as the invitation to discipleship in John’s Gospel.
In the Gospel of John, the invitation to discipleship is not only,
“Follow me.”

It’s ALSO “Come and see.”
And those words get repeated over and over again.

We hear them a second time in our text, when Philip tells
Nathanael about Jesus, “son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

To which Nathanael says, “Can anything good come out of
Nazareth?”

To which Philip replies, “Come and see.”
Come and see.

It’s not just an invitation.
It’s a call.

If we read on in John’s Gospel, we’ll hear that call two more times.
In chapter 11, those are the words that Jesus hears when he goes to visit
Mary and Martha upon the death of their brother, Lazarus.

Martha and Mary say, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Jesus says, “Where have you laid him?”
They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’”

And what does Jesus do next?
He raises Lazarus from the dead.
Because giving new life...is what Jesus was called to do.

But there’s another time we hear the call: **Come and see...**

Do you remember the story of the woman at the well?
It’s only told in John’s Gospel, chapter 4.

Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well.
And he doesn’t heal her.
And he performs no miracle for her.

What does Jesus do?

Jesus has a conversation with her, pays attention to her, when no one in Jesus’s day—not his disciples, not even the woman—would have expected Jesus to say one word to her.

And John writes:

“Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman...Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’”

It’s the gift of BEING SEEN.
That’s what Jesus gave the woman.

It's the gift of being told, in a society that overlooks you—
you have VALUE to me!

As the columnist David Brooks recently put it:

“No crueler punishment can be devised than *not* to see someone, to render them unimportant or invisible. ‘The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them,’ George Bernard Shaw [once] wrote, ‘but to be indifferent to them...’

To do that is to say: You don't matter. You don't exist.”²

In 2022, the reporter Andrea Elliott won a Pulitzer Prize for her book about a child named Dasani, an 11-year-old Black girl who grows up homeless in Brooklyn.

In his review of the book, the acclaimed author Matthew Desmond writes:

“Dasani did back flips at bus stops and could best the boys in a pull-up contest. At [the homeless shelter], she looked after her siblings, changing diapers and making sandwiches, giving the other children the middle pieces of the loaf and taking the ends for herself.

“Even her school principal called her a ‘precocious little button’ and believed her potential to be limitless.”

“[That potential] contrasted brutally with her degrading and dangerous surroundings. Her family—[her mother and her mother's husband]...along with their eight children—lived in a single room at

² David Brooks, *How To Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, New York: Random House, 2023.

[the shelter], their clothes and mattresses forming a helter-skelter patchwork over the linoleum floor.”

The shelter itself was a mess.

At the shelter, “the fire alarm system was inoperable;
the heat cut off in the winter;
and the family [was constantly battling] mice and roaches.

All this “was supported by public funds, but neither the public nor the press was allowed inside.”

So Andrea Elliott, the reporter, SNUCK inside.

She wanted to see for herself the conditions that Dasani and her family and so many other were living in...

As Dasani’s story progresses, the reader learns that her “best shot to break the cycle [of poverty] arrives when she is admitted to the Milton Hershey School, a Pennsylvania boarding school for low-income children...

And “Dasani begins to thrive at Hershey,” but “her family back in New York begins to unravel.

“Dasani makes the track team.

Her 7-year-old brother runs away...

“For technology education, Dasani edits a movie
with her new best friend [at the school]...”

All while Dasani’s mother is barred from...home by child protective services and begins sleeping outside, and her mother’s husband is arrested, which means the children, Dasani’s siblings, are sent to three different foster homes.

When Dasani hears about all this in Pennsylvania, she blames herself.

It's happening because she's not there to keep her family together!
She lashes out at a girl at school, bloodying the girl's nose.

As Matthew Desmond writes:

“...we cannot understand that which we refuse to see, and Elliott forces us to look...to take in Dasani's pain and beauty—to watch her grow up.”³

Do you know what Andrea Elliott titled this marvelous and heart-breaking book?

*Invisible Child.*⁴

What are you looking for? says Jesus.
Are you looking for the invisible children in our own city?
So that we can let them know they are not forgotten?

What are you looking for?
Jesus doesn't just ask that of his first disciples.
He asks it of these disciples.

Are you looking for the neighbor down the street from you who is quietly suffering the grief of losing their spouse of the past 53 years...you don't know them. But you always wave to them. Do you think God might want you not just to wave...but to truly see them?

³ Matthew Desmond, “Dasani Showed Us What It's Like to Grow Up Homeless. She's Still Struggling.” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2021.

⁴ Andrea Elliott, *Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival, and Hope in an American City*, New York: Random House, 2021.

To invite their pain and suffering into your home?

Today's text is not only about who we see
and don't see and the people Jesus wants us to see...
it's also about being seen.

Being known. And the difference that makes in our lives.
As followers of Jesus, we know all about this.

Jesus says to Nathanael, "Here is truly an Israelite in which there is no deceit!"

Astonished, Nathanael replies, "Where did you get to know me?"

In Jesus Christ, God has seen us and known us,
with all our warts and our worries,
our success and our sin and our insecurities...
and after seeing all that,
God forgives us and delights in us,
and calls us to see and delight not just in family and
friends...but in the neighbor we do not know and in the stranger God
wants us to get to know...

Mary Ann Bird is a woman who died back in 2012.
She lived part of her life in Foxboro, Massachusetts, where she
wrote a column for The Foxboro Reporter called "A Bird's Eye View".

One time, she wrote about her growing up years, in a piece that
was eventually published by Reader's Digest.

It wasn't an easy childhood for Mary Ann.

She was born deaf in one ear, with a severe cleft palate, a crooked nose...she required some 17 surgeries throughout her childhood.

It meant she didn't look like all the other kids.
Which meant the other kids often teased her.

"Oh Mary Ann," her classmates would say, "what happened to your lip?"

"I cut it on a piece of glass," she would lie.

One of the hardest experiences came every school year, on the day of the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear, then the other.

It was called "the whisper test"...the teacher would whisper something like "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes" in the child's ear, and if the child repeated the phrase correctly, he or she passed the test. To avoid the humiliation of failing in front of her classmates, Mary Ann would always cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what the teacher said.

One year, Mary Ann was in Miss Leonard's class.

The day of the dreaded hearing test arrived.

As Mary Ann cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper.

"I waited for those words," Mary Ann wrote, "which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life."

For Miss Leonard did not say, "The sky is blue," or "You have new shoes."

What she whispered to Mary Ann was:

“I wish you were my little girl.”⁵

Come and see.

You know, I said earlier in this sermon that we hear those words
FOUR TIMES.

Twice in our text for today...
Again in chapter 11, the raising of Lazarus...
And before that, in chapter 4 of John’s Gospel, the woman at the
well.

Four times.

But I was wrong.

Come and see is what we hear from the risen Christ...every day.

After all, it’s one thing when the salsa is right in front of me, and I
fail to see it. I think God is probably laughing with my family about
that.

It’s another thing entirely when a suffering child of God is right
around the corner from me...

and Jesus says:

“Come and see.”

Amen.

⁵ This story comes from two sources. I first heard about the story in Thomas G. Long’s book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004. Additional information came from the following website: <http://leaderhelps.com/2017/02/06/on-compassion-the-whisper-test/>.