

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Dr. Thomas P. Harp

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

When the Light Goes On

John 1:29-42

A few years ago Carol and I were out to dinner with friends down in Naples. ABC news anchor, Charlie Gibson, sat a couple of tables away. We recognized him, but couldn't think of his name right away so we whispered back and forth trying to come up with it. You could see similar conversations going on at other tables around the room. People glanced his way, but nobody wanted to approach him. On the one hand everybody respected his privacy, which I think is a good thing. On the other hand, everybody checked him out from a safe distance. Famous people attract attention. Most people check them out from a distance.

I think that's what those two disciples were doing long ago. John pointed to Jesus, called him the Lamb of God, and they began following him from a distance. I can almost see it, Jesus walking down the street, in and out of the crowd. Those two disciples of John's trying their best not to be seen, standing on tiptoes to see better, peering around corners, darting from one side of the street to another... following... curious... wondering just who this Lamb of God was. No doubt, they were also wondering what in the world that title might mean. Lamb of God is not your ordinary form of address. So Andrew and the other disciple, not wanting to get too close, followed Jesus from a distance. Close enough to keep an eye on him, but not close enough to bump into him.

Their strategy didn't work, though. Jesus somehow knew they were there. Probably kept walking a ways just to see if they were in fact following him. But eventually he ducked into an alley. And when they reached that point, he stepped out directly in front of them. You can imagine their discomfort as he looked them in the eye. Embarrassed about being caught, they probably hemmed and hawed when he asked them what they were looking for. How else can you explain their rather absurd answer, "Oh, we're just wondering where you are staying." Can't blame them, though. If Charlie Gibson had come over to our table that night and asked us what we were staring at, we might have said something just as silly.

Isn't it true, though, that most of us began our faith pilgrimage by following Jesus from a distance? We grew up hearing stories about him, attracted to him, curious about him, but not really knowing what to believe. Or maybe someone invited us to church, so we visited not knowing what to expect. We'd heard about Christians and what they believed and wanted to see for ourselves. Or we picked up a Bible in a motel room and read a few chapters, decided to check this guy out. In any event, we kept our distance at first. Didn't know quite what to expect. Certainly we didn't understand what people said about him, Son of God or Lamb of God. It's only natural. We're cautious about the unknown, uncertain about someone new. Our guard is up. We're curious, but cautious.

But Jesus is not one for caution. On the contrary, he boldly invites us to come and see, just as he invited John's disciples long ago. Come and see. Get acquainted. Get involved. Join in worship. Sign on for a mission trip. Feed folks at St. Matthew's House. Volunteer at Grace Place or the Hospital or any number of other places Christ's work is being done. Pick up a hammer and saw and pound nails with the habitat volunteers. Or tutor a family that has never owned a home. Teach them what's involved in home ownership, financial planning and so on. But don't! Don't

just throw money at something, unless you simply can't do anything else. Don't stay at a safe distance because by getting involved, in accepting Jesus' invitation to come and see, you get to know better who Jesus is. And getting to know him better, you experience the truth about him. He really is unlike anyone you have ever met—and yet, he's so like us, except for our caution. Jesus is not one for caution. He invites us to come and see for ourselves.

What's interesting is that like John the Baptist we may have known him all along, but we just didn't know who he was. John and Jesus were cousins, yet John exclaims, "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." You and I may have grown up in church, but for some reason we just never really got hooked. You've probably heard similar stories from others on occasion. How many times have you heard someone say, I was raised in church, but I didn't really know Jesus until... and they go on to talk about their conversion experience.

On the one hand that claim burns me up. It implies that people go to church all their lives, but they never really met Jesus there. At least that is the way many say it, as if the last place you can meet Jesus is in church. On the other hand, I understand what they mean because each of us can meet up with Jesus a thousand times and not recognize him. In part that may be because we're blind to his presence. More than likely it means that God hasn't opened our eyes to Christ's presence.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of the great preachers of the 19th century wrote, "When for the first time, I received the gospel to my soul's salvation, I thought that I had never really heard it before, and I began to think that the preachers to whom I had listened had not truly preached it. But on looking back, I am inclined to believe that I had heard the gospel fully preached many hundreds of times before, and that this was the difference... the power of the Holy Spirit was present to open my ear and to guide the message to my heart."¹ Truth is, many people, like Charles Spurgeon and John the Baptist, have known Jesus all along, but they didn't really know him until the light went on and faith came to full flower.

So where were you when the light went on, when you, like John, saw the Spirit descend on Jesus and remain with him? How did you begin to recognize the signs of his presence? Feel free to talk about that, to testify as John the Baptist did. It's possible, of course, that you are still following from a distance, intrigued, but uncertain, just checking him out. It's also possible that you once were an excited and enthusiastic disciple, but that now you have your doubts. So you come today hoping to meet up with him again as Marcus Borg talks about in his book, "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time." One way or the other, I invite you to get involved, to come and see, as Jesus said to those disciples long ago.

Come and see, and like Andrew you may find yourself running to your sister or brother exclaiming, "We have found the Messiah." Come and see and like Walter Wangerin, Lutheran Pastor and marvelous writer, who after a choir trip to the Colorado Women's penitentiary, exclaimed, "My God how you do break the bars! How you fling open the doors that prison and divide us! This is true, for mine eyes have seen it and my heart went out to it: You are so mighty in your mercy."² Seems the women in the prison had intruded on the choir's rehearsal time such

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, as quoted in *Conversions: The Christian Experience*, edited by Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 130.

² Walter Wangerin, Jr., *Ragman: And Other Cries of Faith*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984), 149.

that the rehearsal and the concert ran together. The fear and anxiety those choir members had felt on entering the prison was swallowed up by the prisoners' joy, some singing, some dancing, some weeping, some clapping their hands in time with the music. "At one point," he writes, "the entire auditorium, choir and criminals together, joined hands and lifted those hands and rocked and sang, 'Oh, How I Love Jesus.'"³

It's that love of Jesus that people hunger for, love that takes away the sin of the world. Not, not because God demands it of him. God does not require his son's blood sacrifice in order to forgive our sin. Let's put that lousy theology to rest. As Lamb of God, Christ's way of life, his compassion for the people, his offering up himself for our sakes, everything about him demonstrated God's great love for us. It's that love of Jesus that invites us to come and see. It's that way of life that we are baptized into. And it's that great love that eventually cracks through our defenses, to turn on the light of faith, that we too may bear witness that Jesus is the Son of God.

³ Ibid.