

Come and See! Pass it on.

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18 and John 1:43-51

One night I was passing through the living room while Sue was on the couch watching television. “Do you want to sit and watch this show with me?” she asked. “It’s really good.” I glanced at the TV screen. The period costumes and British accents told me right away that it was Downton Abbey she was watching. Which struck me as being about as interesting as watching a documentary on collecting backscratchers. Something I was pretty certain she would figure out for herself after a few episodes. “No thanks”, I replied.

As the weeks went by, though, Sue got deeper and deeper into the show. Until one night I finally gave in and agreed to give Downton Abbey a shot; still secretly skeptical that it would appeal to me. And, do you know what happened. I liked it! I absolutely fell in love with Maggie Smith’s character...Violet Crawley! Who knew that such a dour matriarch could be laugh out loud funny with her dry but delightful sense of humor! When it was announced that a Downton Abbey movie was in the works, I got right on to watching for its appearance on the Gardner Cinema’s billboard. Sometimes it takes a personal invitation from someone we know and trust to motivate us to come and see for ourselves something that our skepticism might have prevented us from ever experiencing.

Nathaniel's experience was someone like that. His friend Philip had followed Jesus and came to Nathanael saying, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also all the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph of Nazareth!” Nathanael was not impressed. Nazareth was a small secluded village that never received a word of mention in scripture. The odds of Nazareth producing an *iceberg* were probably better than its chances of producing anyone of such importance that the scriptures would be filled with prophecies about him.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael scoffed. To which Philip simply replied, “Come and see.” He didn’t offer an explanation for what he believed to be true about Jesus. He didn’t argue his point. He just invited. Come and see. So Nathanael went and saw.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Nathanael went and *was seen*. When Philip introduced him to Jesus, Jesus greeted Nathanael as if they were long lost friends. Jesus said of him, “Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael asked him how it was that Jesus thought he knew him, when they had never met before. Jesus explained that he saw Nathanael under a fig tree before Philip even told him about Jesus. Which, of course, was impossible.

Nathanael came to Jesus to see for himself and discovered that it was *he who was seen by Jesus*. He was seen in a way that laid bare the very essence of who he was. Known in a way that only the One who knit him together in his mother’s womb could possibly know him. And just like that, having come and seen Jesus for himself, Nathanael found himself as unexpectedly hooked on Jesus as I was on Downton Abbey. “Rabbi” he exclaimed; “you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel.”

We can know for a fact that Nathanael was hooked even though Nathanael is only mentioned one other time in all the stories of the four Gospels. That one time is in the last chapter of John. When the

resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples by the Sea of Tiberius, Nathanael was there. What he saw in his first introduction to Jesus, committed him to following Jesus for the rest of his life.

There is one more “come and see” story in John’s Gospel. This one took place as Jesus and his disciples (most likely including Nathanael!) were traveling through Samaria. They stopped at mid-day near a well. The disciples went into the city to get some food for them to eat while Jesus waited by the well. While they were gone, a Samaritan woman came to fill her water jug. She and Jesus got into a conversation about the issues that separated Jews and Samaritans. In the course of that conversation, Jesus revealed that he knew things about her past that no stranger could possibly know. She returned to town and told her neighbors, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

With their curiosity aroused by her story; the townsfolk went to see Jesus for themselves. As a result of going and seeing for themselves, many of them came to believe in Jesus. They said to the woman who invited them to come and see Jesus, “it is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

There is a recurring, discernible “come and see” pattern to the stories of people coming to a faith in Jesus and passing it on to others. When Andrew asked Jesus where he was staying, Jesus said “come and see.” Then Andrew went and told his brother Simon that he had found the Messiah. Simon went with Andrew to see Jesus for himself. But it was Simon who was seen by Jesus, who greeted him saying, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which when translated is Peter.) But which is further translated as “Rock.” Jesus already could see Peter’s potential to be the rock upon which a church could be built before he actually set eyes on him.

Philip, who came from the same city as Andrew and Peter, went and found Nathanael, and brought him to Jesus. All of them became Jesus’ disciples, dedicating their lives to inviting others to come and see Jesus for themselves. A Samaritan woman went to her neighbors and said “come and see” someone who could see all the secrets I keep inside and yet did not reject me. They went and saw someone who they recognized as the Savior of the world, even though they were not Jews themselves. At no point in this parade of believers did someone join because they were won over by another’s theological knowledge or by having the fear of God drummed into them by threats of hellfire and brimstone. They simply responded to an invitation to “come and see” Jesus. They *went and saw*, but more importantly they knew themselves *to be seen* by One who loved them just as they were; just as the voice of Psalm 139 expressed wonder at the way God could know his thoughts from afar and be acquainted with all her ways, and yet have a place reserved for them in God’s Kingdom.

All these ages later, it remains a fact that more people come to Christ’s church through a personal invitation from someone they know, than by street corner evangelism, billboards, or social media. But what is equally true is this: many people who consider their church to be an indispensable part of their life, nevertheless do not feel comfortable inviting someone else to come and see for themselves what the church might have to offer them.

In some ways, the COVID Pandemic has opened our churches to *be seen* by more people than ever, without them having to physically “come and see.” Our virtual services are often viewed by greater numbers of people than would typically gather in person in this house of worship. Our audience

sometimes includes people from other towns, other regions of our country and occasionally from outside of our country.

One lasting lesson we may take from the pandemic is the importance of our wider visibility on social media; such as our website and our Facebook page. But this teachable moment in which we find ourselves begs the question of how else we can be a place where people feel invited to “Come and See” without fearing that if they were “seen” for who they really are they would not be welcomed.

What if now is the time to begin the conversation about openly declaring ourselves to be an Open and Affirming Church? So that LGBTQ neighbors, whose default assumption about any church that does not explicitly welcome them implies that they are unwelcome, will not be a barrier to their finding acceptance under this roof.

What if now is the opportune time to re-examine what it means to be a “friendly” church for those to whom questions of whether anything good can come out of including people of their skin color or place of origin is a hard fact of life.

It may seldom have been more imperative than in these times of brazen and violent pushback against the celebration of diversity in our land, for churches to be beacons that welcome *all* with the invitation that has been passed on to us: “Come and See!”

Let’s pass it on!

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