

John 1:29–42 (NRSV)

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 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.”

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

## Come and See

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: January 19, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: John 1:29-42

I want to start this morning with a brief poll. You are here in church this morning. So, how many of you stumbled in by mistake? How many of you fell out of the sky and ended up here this morning by surprise? How many of you headed out this morning and said, I think I'll go to the mall, but lo and behold, to your shock, you found yourself here? Not many, I suppose. Almost every one of you who is here this morning came on purpose. You could have been somewhere else, but you came here. So, what are you looking for? What brings you here today?

A very long time ago scores of people descended into Jordan River valley near the Dead Sea, and they, too, came with purpose. There in the intense heat of the desolate wilderness there arose religious movements that drew large numbers of people. They came from Jerusalem and as far away as Galilee. [Slide 1] Many of them gathered in spiritual communities such as Qumran, near the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Others gathered around the likes of John the Baptist who appeared in the desert [Slide 2] wearing camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and honey, preaching repentance and the coming of the kingdom of God. None of them came by accident. They went out to find John in the Judean wilderness on purpose. They were moved by a deep spiritual longing.

As we patch together the narratives available to us, it becomes clear that many came; John collected numerous devoted followers. They fled the cities and the temperate pasturelands and took to those inhospitable environs near the Dead Sea searching for something otherwise missing in their lives. [End Slide 2] It must have been a heady experience. Something in their veins told them that there was more to life than they had yet discovered.

Among those who came to the wilderness to be with John, we are told, was Jesus of Nazareth. Our Gospel accounts each tell the story of John and Jesus a little differently, but by most accounts they were close. Luke tells us they were family, likely boys of the same age who grew up seeing each other when their families met. And the Gospel of John seems to suggest that in the time Jesus was baptized, they were together down by the Jordan for awhile.

During this period in the Gospel of John, as in all the accounts we have, John the Baptist recognized Jesus as God's chosen son. After this some of John the Baptist's disciples began to follow Jesus. We hear that Jesus was walking by. "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" says the Baptist. Two who heard John say this began to follow after Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him. He said to them, "What are you looking for?"

What an interesting question Jesus asks. Everyone there had come into the desert on purpose. They had begun to follow John the Baptist on purpose. None of it was by accident. Yet the exact reason seems unstated, almost beyond words. Jesus asks: What are you looking for? What do you want? What are you doing here? Why do you follow after me?

The questions hang in the air down by the Jordan, and they reach across the span of ages. They are the questions alive and penetrating for anyone who comes to follow Jesus, whether it be in the wilderness of Judea or in a church sanctuary. What are you looking for? It is the big

question. It's big because, as deceptively simple as it is, it penetrates to the very heart of the matter. What are you looking for?

The two men who followed Jesus offered a rather odd reply. Indeed, they answered with a question. They asked, "Where are you staying?" Did they miss the import of what Jesus was asking? Were they looking for a place to sleep? Maybe they wanted to know if he was going back to Galilee or planned to stay down in Judea. They knew he was from that backwater of Nazareth. Maybe they were concerned about where they would live. Of course, all of this is simply silly, though over the centuries such ideas have been proposed.

"Where are you staying?" they ask. Staying. It's an interesting word in John. Where are you staying. Matthew, Mark and Luke use the word a tiny handful of times. John uses it 40 times. And look how. The spirit came like a dove and stayed on him. The spirit of truth stays in you and will be with you. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who stay in me and I in them bear much fruit. If you stay in me, and my words stay in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Of course you have heard these verses more often translated with the word abide. If you abide in me and, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish. Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit. It's the same word—abiding, staying.

The two disciples of John the Baptist who begin to follow Jesus are not asking about housing. They are asking him, where do you abide? Or more accurately, they are answering his question. Jesus says to them, what are you looking for? And they answer him, we are looking for that thing, that something extraordinary, that abides in you. That's what we want, they say. That's why we are following you. We want to know where you live in the fullest meaning of that idea. That's why we came out here in the wilderness in the first place. We long after an abiding place; we long after the place where you abide.

Jesus' response to the followers is also deceptively simple. They ask, Where do you abide? He says, Come and see.

Jesus doesn't hand them a small tract—the seven habits of highly effective abiders, or something like that. Jesus doesn't say, Just call me the Messiah, and you're all set. Jesus doesn't say: Just get baptized; that's all there is to it. This abiding isn't something quick and dirty. They can't do it in a day, or a year, or hardly in a lifetime. This abiding requires time, and following, and, well, abiding, living into a way of living. It is a process of spiritual development. It is about spending time in Jesus' presence, day by day watching him, hearing him, bringing him their questions and doubts and worries, hearing what he has to say, taking it in, mulling it over, and ever so gradually learning where he abides and learning to abide in him.

Near the end of the Gospel of John Jesus says that after he has gone the counselor, the Holy Spirit, will come and teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. In other words, the path of discipleship is never ending. But the good news is that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, the risen Christ, will continue to abide in them even after his death. This is the promise to Jesus' followers in every age. The Holy Spirit accompanies them and counsels them. It abides in them and teaches them to abide in the spirit of truth. This is the Christian life. This is how you find what you are looking for. Dare I say it, this is why we are here this morning.

Let me note just a few more things before closing.

When Jesus' asks the disciples what they are looking for, they give a deep and poignant answer—we want to know where you abide. It's a huge answer, sort of like I want to know how the whole of the universe works. But it is an imprecise answer as well. There are very good

reasons for that, I think. Though Jesus will indeed teach them by way of specific examples, every specific answer rests on a larger and deeper foundation than is immediately obvious, and these followers sense it. They've spent up until now in their lives navigating daily life, family and livelihood, their whole lives, specific by specific moment in a more or less reasonable way. But what they sense is that there is something deeper and more fundamental on which all life's specific moments and decisions hang.

And that's what set them off searching into the desert. They went in search of this more immense, more fundamental, more holistic, more complete way of abiding. At some level, whether they fully understood why or not, they knew that they could not describe what they were looking for in specific or superficial or narrow terms, like I'm looking for a good job, or a good education. What they were looking was more capacious, and could only be described more metaphorically—I'm looking to find out where you are living.

And Jesus' answer is equally open-ended. Come and see, he says. And what do they see? Throughout the time that they spend with Jesus they will receive a lot of concrete instruction, to be sure. But more often than not, that instruction will be couched in mysterious metaphors—I abide in you and you abide in me. I am the vine and you are the branches. I am the shepherd and you are the sheep. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word became flesh. You must be born again, anew or from above. Drink the living water and you will not thirst again. The Son of Man will give you food that endures forever. I am the light of the world. I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever sees me sees him who sent me. To follow Jesus is enter a world of magnificent, but equally elusive images and symbols and accounts of reality.

This teaching and learning of these large mysteries at the foundation of life is a long process. At important times the Gospel of John refers to Jesus as rabbi or rabbuni and tells us that the word means teacher. All of the Gospels emphasize Jesus' teaching, none more than John. The disciples follow Jesus and learn from him to find where he abides. But it is clear that the learning is ongoing. It happens in fits and starts. People go backwards.

We find Mary Magdalene at the tomb at the very end of the Gospel. She is weeping because she cannot find Jesus' dead body. Jesus speaks to her, "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" the very question posed to those first followers down by the Jordan—what are you looking for? After all his teaching, she, like the other disciples, is looking for Jesus where he does not abide, in the tomb. Only when he addresses her by name "Mary," does she recognize him—Rabbouni, she says, responding to the teacher. Once again abiding in him, she goes and tells the others, "I have seen the Lord."

This is the life of discipleship—one minute in tears, looking in the wrong place; the next minute joyously recognizing and abiding in the mystery of Jesus. It's why we come, I suppose. Something in us knows that we must keep coming, keep learning and re-learning, keep discovering and re-discovering where Jesus lives and how we may abide in him. Come and see. Amen.