

An Invitation to Hope

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John 1: 29-42

They started building it back in September. And for awhile things progressed so quickly that it seemed like we might actually be moved into our new home by Christmas. Our contractor and crew chief even hinted at that possibility. It wasn't *just* our wishful thinking. But now, as I said at Loaves & Fishes last Wednesday when someone asked what our target date is for completion: "I've stopped asking." Any of you who have ever built a home, probably know exactly what I'm talking about. But, it's been a lesson in waiting.

And there's another lesson in waiting I've been undergoing. I bought it back in mid-December. It was to be a Christmas gift for Charlette. (I won't tell you what it is, because it still hasn't arrived.) But, I bought it through ebay. I won the auction. I guess that's what you call it. Now, I've purchased other things through ebay and have never had any problems. But, with this, first of all for about a week I didn't hear from the seller on the details what the total payment would be with shipping and how they wanted to proceed. So, finally I got the seller contact information from ebay and called them up. They apologized. Apparently my purchase had somehow just gotten overlooked. They'd take care of it. So, they sent me an email, detailing everything, and we proceeded.

And from then on, I looked in the mail every day, hoping it would arrive by Christmas, of course. It didn't. And then for awhile I looked hopefully in the mail in the week after Christmas. And then I went to alternately hoping it would arrive and cursing the seller, wondering if I'd been ripped off. Searching and hoping you know? Sometimes hoping against hope. Wondering if I will ever get these things I've been waiting for.

As the Gospel of John tells the story, it must have been something like that for John the Baptist's disciples. As John has it, they were all hopefully looking and waiting for the revealing of the Son of God. John the Baptist, his disciples, like Andrew and to greater or lesser degrees pretty much everybody else. They were searching for the One who could bring them full life... their life fulfilled and purposeful and fully realized. And so, the day comes, as John's Gospel has it. John the Baptist sees the Spirit descend and rest on Jesus. And so, John testifies to his own disciples: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

And two of John's disciples, standing there with him, take off after Jesus. They begin following him. And Jesus sees them and turns to them and asks, "What are you looking for?" And they answer, "Teacher, where are you staying?" "Where are you abiding." "Where do you abide, Jesus?" Even having been addressed by him, they want to know where to find this One they've been waiting and hoping and looking for all their lives. Well, we call it lots of things, salvation, our true home, our true self, meaning, purpose, fulfillment. But, we too, are looking for how to know and find and live in God.

That's what this journey called "faith" is about. That's really what it was about when we began it, wasn't it? Do you remember what you were looking for when you first started following Jesus? That's what it was about then, and it being a lifelong journey, it's what is about still. Where do we find God amidst our daily life and how do we live our lives in God in a conscious way? Where does God abide? And sometimes it can get confusing can't it? Even within the church there is so much divergence and difference of opinion over what this is really all about. And that's not even taking account of the richness and diversity of all of the rest of our life's experience, as our lives intersect with the earth, with creation and with other cultures and religions and peoples, not to mention the "answers" provided by our consumer culture.

And so, like John's disciples, even after having begun following, even after having been addressed by Jesus, our journey is still a looking, a searching for where he abides. Well, listen to the answer Jesus gives in this story. "Come and see," he says. It's an invitation. Come and you'll see where I abide. He doesn't just tell them how and where to find him. Would that it were that simple, right? He doesn't tell them, "you'll always be able to find me here, or you'll always see me there." He doesn't say, "I'm in room 110 at Motel 6." He says, "Come and you'll find out."

"Follow, and you'll abide in God." See, this is the Gospel of John's way of telling a call story. And here's John's point. Here's John's way of saying it: "We can abide in God if we follow Jesus." And he's got it all in there, you see? Because, he's already had John the Baptist declare: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" And that's shorthand for here is the One who shows us ourselves and God's self fully and honestly. We, as individuals and as human cultures, are people who demand a victim, demand someone to blame, demand a scapegoat to pay for all the injustice we feel has happened to us, and all that we think is wrong with our life and our world. Whether it be the Jews under Nazi Germany, or America in the eyes of Islamic terrorists, or Saddam Hussein.

We demand someone to sacrifice, to (we think) make things right. That is the essence of the sin of the world, the essence of our separation from God. And in Jesus Christ, God acts to bridge that separation, to take away that sin, by offering Himself to us as our victim. The lamb we demand is supplied by God himself. "Here is the lamb of God." That's how God takes away the sin of the world, by showing us ourselves painfully honestly, that even when we think we are at our most righteous, we are complicit in the murdering of God. God shows us that so we can be set free from that. For then in the aftermath of that tragedy, God forgives us even so. God raises Jesus up, to say, "not even that, not even when you crucify me, will keep me away from loving you."

So, you see what John's Gospel is saying? We can abide in God if we follow this One, if we offer ourselves up to others and to life in the way that Jesus did. That may one day mean a cross. But, in the short term it means at least what it means in this story: invitational hospitality. You see *how* Andrew followed Jesus in this story? Jesus invited them to come and see, and they came and saw and they abided with him that day. And then Andrew went and found his brother and essentially issued the same invitation. "Come and see!" "We've found the Messiah." And by that invitation, he brought Simon to Jesus. And as John's Gospel has it, so the church was begun.

Jesus looked at Simon and said, "You are to be called Cephas," Peter, which means rock. And, of course, Peter became the head of the church. All of it with an invitation from God, followed by, imitated by a human invitation to another. Invitational hospitality. Personally, I like those words. I think they're good. But, we need to understand that hospitality is an ethical matter in the New Testament and at the very center of the Gospel.

A few years ago a 30 second T.V. spot prepared by the United Church of Christ led with church bells chiming. Two muscle-bound men stood, arms cross in front of a Gothic cathedral. A gay couple approaches, holding hands. "Step aside, please," say these muscle-bound guys. They then speak similar words to an African-American girl, a Hispanic man, a young man in a wheelchair. Then just when it dawns on us that the two large men are "church bouncers," the scene fades to black and the tag line reads: "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we." CBS and NBC both refused to air the spot, claiming it was too controversial. Maybe hospitality practiced Jesus' style is still a radical, ethical issue.

I think we probably don't tend to associate hospitality with ethical issues, do we? Mark Ralls tells the story of a meeting with a group of church members about changing the name of the

evangelism committee. The group kind of divided into two camps. One side recalled Billy Graham and felt that their committee wasn't really worthy of the title "evangelists"; others remembered Jim Bakker and thought their committee could do better. Thinking he had the perfect solution, Ralls recommended that they call themselves the hospitality committee. But, neither side liked that at all. One man finally broke the silence, saying, "We're about more than just hospitality. That makes it sound like we're the tea and crumpets committee."

But, folks the hospitality of Jesus was controversial for its prodigality. I mean it just extended everywhere, regardless of what people had done, or what righteous, role-model type people thought of them. Prostitutes, adulterers, crooks, lepers, outcasts of every kind. That's what happens in this story. Jesus just issues an invitation to come. And Andrew follows Jesus, by doing the same. Because hospitality, open-armed acceptance is what we all need. Being welcomed and served is the beginning of being able to open ourselves to life and to one another, isn't it?

So, giving bottles of water out on Mondays isn't just some nice, kind of "tea and crumpets" thing we do. It's an attempt to offer an invitation to share life together, with whoever shows up in our parking lot! It's saying we are a congregation that is open to you, accepting of you, whoever you are. Invitational hospitality. It's what we are seeking to do in another way through Wednesday Walkers. And it's what we're trying to do by having this covered-dish dinner after worship on Scout Sunday, for the scouts and their families. Friends this is important! This is how the church is the church! Period. I believe it's what people need. I believe if we mean it, and offer like we mean it, it will be at least a glimpse, a glimmer of hope for someone.

You know, in the midst of all this waiting and watching I've been doing in regard to this house we're building. All its ever taken to kindle hope in me is answering the implicit invitation, as we do every afternoon when Charlette gets home from work and we drive up to the house, to come and see. And all it took to rekindle hope that I really will be able to give Charlette that Christmas gift, was one short email I got from the seller on Thursday morning. It was an invitation to hope. That's what we have to offer, isn't it, because in Christ it's been offered to us. We can be Christ's disciples in that way. And we will know him abiding in us, and in our neighbors, and we will abide in him. That's the promise. Come and see.

Amen.