

Inviting Jesus to Stay

Our lectionary takes a detour today from the Gospel of Matthew into the Gospel of John. Last week, Matthew recounted Jesus's baptism, describing the Holy Spirit's descent onto our Lord and the Father's declaration that Jesus is his beloved Son with whom he is well pleased. This morning, John takes a different approach. Instead of telling the story himself, the evangelist has John the Baptist describe how the Holy Spirit descended and remained on Jesus. In this Gospel, it is the Baptist, not the Father, who proclaims Jesus as the Son of God.

The Baptist's testimony inspires two of his disciples, one of whom may be the young John himself, to approach Jesus. They ask where he's staying, and Jesus invites them to come and see. After remaining with Jesus until late afternoon, the other disciple, Andrew, goes looking for his brother to tell him that they have found the Messiah. That brother is, of course, Simon Peter, whom Jesus names "the Rock" the moment he lays eyes on him.

John's is the latest of the four Gospels, and the most mystical. As Bible scholar David F. Ford observes, John omits many episodes that are chronicled in the other Gospels because John is less concerned with the things Jesus does in his ministry than with who Jesus *is* – the only begotten, crucified and resurrected Son of God. But in this instance, John chooses to tell his readers how a few of the disciples first met and came to follow Jesus. It seems that John wants his readers – and us – to learn something about Jesus from this initial encounter.

This passage twice names Jesus as the "lamb of God," a designation that only the Gospel of John uses. That name has become familiar to Christians through centuries of use, but John's readers would likely have been startled by it. They would have understood the sacrificial implications of the name that foreshadows Jesus's crucifixion. We can wonder whether and how well the disciples understood it when they first heard it on the Baptist's lips.

To better understand it ourselves, we need to consider the disciples' first words to Jesus: "where are you staying?" That seemingly simple question includes a conjugation of μένω (meno), one of John's favorite words. He uses it thirty-four times in this Gospel and nineteen times in his letters. Μένω means "stay," but it also means "dwell," "remain," or "abide." It's the word John uses to describe the Holy Spirit "remaining" with Jesus at his baptism and the Father and Jesus "remaining" in one another. It's the word Jesus uses later in this Gospel when he asks his beloved disciples to "abide" in him. Μένω implies an invitation to enter into relationship, to become friends with someone who is always there to help in times of need. The disciples might not understand that at the time, but Jesus certainly does.

This passage evokes scenes from many famous stories: knights answering King Arthur's call to join the Round Table, Robin Hood gathering his Merry Men, J.R.R. Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring setting out to defeat the evil Sauron. Everything is fresh and new, brimming with hope and promise. The disciples haven't yet descended into endless bickering about who among them is the greatest. They haven't yet fallen asleep at Gethsemane, leaving Jesus to agonize alone. Peter hasn't yet denied Jesus three times. Those things will happen, but the disciples don't know it yet. Jesus, the embodied Word of God, undoubtedly does. And he invites them anyway.

To fully appreciate the significance of that invitation, John asks us to focus on exactly who Jesus is. King Arthur, Robin Hood and Gandalf the Wizard are all legendary heroes, powerful and good, but they're still just men. John's Gospel tells us that Jesus is the beloved, immortal Son of God who voluntarily takes on human nature and agrees to be lifted high on the cross to lift humanity out of sin and despair. But Jesus doesn't just die for us, spectacular as that sacrifice is. Jesus becomes one of us and one with us. He engages in daily life with us, eats with

us, teaches us, heals us, hangs out with us, walks with us, and puts up with all our shortcomings and shenanigans. We cannot help but disappoint him, and he abides with us nonetheless.

Having met Jesus, the disciples will walk with him throughout his earthly life and beyond, though they can't possibly anticipate that their path will lead them to Golgotha, through the Resurrection and on to martyrdom. Tradition tells us that only John, the beloved disciple, will die a natural death after writing this Gospel, some letters and the Book of Revelation – the others will be martyred. Before that happens, most of them will fall away from the path at one time or another. But Jesus is steadfast in forgiveness. He abides with them, giving them the grace they need to come back and do better. He does the same for us, if we let him.

This weekend, we honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights hero whom we celebrate for helping to put this country on the road to social justice. Dr. King had a lot in common with John the Baptist. Both were men of impassioned, fearless faith. Both had a clear vision of what the world could be if humanity would allow itself to be transformed by God's saving love. Both spoke the unvarnished truth, both confronted power and corruption, both lost their lives performing the work God called them to do. And both were compelling, charismatic speakers who could move their listeners to repent of their past mistakes and swear to do better.

Scripture gives us only a precious few words from John the Baptist. We have more from Dr. King, perhaps none more widely known than the "I Have a Dream" speech he delivered off the cuff at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. Sixty years later, we could wonder how well we've succeeded in making Dr. King's dream a reality, but we'd be kidding ourselves. Racism remains an enduring evil that distorts the American dream of liberty and justice for all. Whether we're talking about employment, education, health care, voting rights, access to healthy food, clean water and decent housing, or even being able to walk down the

street or into a store without being scrutinized, harassed, arrested, or killed, people of color in this country are at a decided disadvantage, and we all know it. We've made some progress over the last sixty years. But institutional racism has proven remarkably difficult to eradicate, and there are entirely too many people who benefit from it and are in no hurry to see it disappear.

And that's where our faith in Jesus, the God who stays, has to come in. If there's one thing human beings should have learned by now, it's that we rarely if ever succeed at saving ourselves by ourselves. We need God's help to become better people, God's love to teach us how to see his beauty in one other, God's insistence that, despite all the ways we drag our feet, look the other way or fail to step up and speak out when we should, the Kingdom is coming and justice ultimately will and must prevail. And if we're ever to have hope for ourselves and each other, we need a God who will abide with us and continue to love us no matter what.

Having recently celebrated a significant birthday, I've reached an age where cynicism and discouragement can come too easily. It's hard, sometimes, not to lose hope. But if Dr. King were still with us, I'd like to believe that his strong Christian faith would have kept him convinced that his dream remains within our reach. We cannot get there without God but, thanks be to God, we don't have to. Jesus, the Son of God who not only died for us, but who lived with and for us, still invites us to live with and for him. We know that Jesus is with us wherever two or more gather in his name, because he promised that he would be and Jesus keeps his word. There have been and will be delays, mistakes and setbacks, because that's what happens whenever people get involved in anything. But if we continue to pray for his help and listen to his teachings, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world might just heal our hearts and take away the sin of racism once and for all. In Jesus's name, and in memory of Dr. King, I pray that he will. Come, Lord Jesus. Come. *Amen.*