

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday after Epiphany
January 19, 2020

Old Testament Lesson

Psalm 139:1-3, 6-12

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

John 1:35-42

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

In the preamble to *John*, we have a very different story about the **origin of Jesus**. It is fair to say that these verses (*John* 1:1-5) are cosmic in nature and far from earthbound, which is how the Christmas stories are depicted in *Matthew* and *Luke*. Instead, Jesus is with, and of, **God** and existed with God **before Creation**. Indeed, the Son of God was with God at Creation and continues with God **now and forever**. Jesus is part of this all-knowing aspect that is God and depicted so well in *Psalm* 139, our selection from the **Hebrew scriptures**.

And, as the presentation of Jesus continues in the *Gospel of John* he is depicted as someone who is **set apart** from the people. There is something slightly mysterious about him. He even understands the substance and personality of individuals **before they meet him** or speak with him (*John* 1:43-51). And, when Jesus decides to gather disciples, there is **no debate** about following him: Jesus appears, chooses whom he wants to join with him, and **they follow**.

John the Baptist continues as the **harbinger** for Jesus and his ministry in the *Gospel of John*. With disciples around him, John notes that the Lamb of God has come into the world and points him out to everyone. This is the very beginning of the **ministry of Jesus**. We are being introduced to some of the stalwarts, the foundation of the new faith which is eventually called, The Way. You and I know a little bit about **Simon Peter**, but let's examine these verses as if this was our first encounter with the disciples.

Now, the writer of *John* understands that this individual we know as Simon, or **Peter** (Really, this would be a nickname: Rocky, in the Greek), is stalwart and **faithful** and resourceful. Rocky, that is Peter, is awestruck, but also **clueless** at times as the Gospel story unfolds. Despite all of these potential shortcomings, Jesus selects **Andrew** and his brother, now called Peter. In turn, they accept this call, and they **follow Jesus**.

As far as we know, Peter is the only disciple who receives a **change of name**. It reminds me of my mother's encounter with the newly hired domestic helper in our home when I was about age four when we lived in Columbus, Mississippi. Unknown to my mother and our helper, I got picked on about my name at the kindergarten I attended with my cousin, Bill, who was my same age. I liked my cousin a lot, and to me "Bill" sounded like a pretty cool name, so I decided to ditch mine: Stanley, which my mother preferred. Well, I thought of other names, but they were taken by the other boys at the pre-school: Mike, Bob, Jim, and the like. So, when the new worker came to the house, she wanted to know my name. And, I told her I was Bill, since I thought my cousin was pretty cool. So, Bill I was, and Bill I remained for a number of days, or weeks, until my mother asked our maid how Stanley was doing. This produced the response of, "Who?"

"You know, that little fellow that runs around here all day: my younger son, Stanley."

"No, Ma'am. He told me his name was Bill. That little boy right there is Bill!"

Well, it became pretty clear that I was the culprit in this episode of mystery-naming of small children. And so, the story was retold as a part of family lore for well over 60 years, now. And, everyone thinks it is pretty amusing, even today.

Not surprisingly, there is no laughing when Jesus decides that the fisherman **Simon** needs a new name. Interestingly, we never hear **Peter** complain about it. And, there is good reason for this. The change in name also represents a change in the life and **vocation** of Peter, who was a **fisherman** along with his brother Andrew. No longer tied to the sea, a boat, and nets, almost right away Peter fully **embraces** the teachings of Jesus and goes on to become a powerful leader within the early church upon the Death, Resurrection, and **Ascension of Christ**.

Now, you and I do not need to change our names, but in the **early church** that was just what people did. Their family names were often changed to one of the established names in the Christian faith: Thomas, Stephen, Peter, James, and many others. This continues today. We still hear of our surname, or family name (Smith) and our Christian name, or "first" name, (Robert) as separate references. In countries where the Roman Catholic church predominated life over many centuries, such as in Spain, each child receives the name of **a saint**, and nearly every newborn girl receives the name of **Mary**, in honor of the mother of Jesus. We are not at that extreme in this selection and renaming of Simon to **Peter**. But, this pattern of **transformation** and new purpose in life will continue throughout scripture in the New Testament.

This is not the only case of matching a **change of vocation** with a change in name. Think of the conversion of **Saul** to become Paul: As described in *Acts*, he was a zealot in **persecuting** the newly forming Christian church and its followers when he met the **Risen Christ** while traveling in his duties to Damascus. He is struck down and takes days to recover.

But, God moves the local Christians in Damascus to **help Paul** and instruct him in the faith founded in the the newly formed church called by **Jesus Christ**. Now named Paul, he is **forever changed**. He abandons his former work and sets about learning all that he can about the new religion that **welcomes the sinful** and the devout and **welcome Jews** together with **Gentiles**. Over time, Paul becomes the most **important person** in the early church. He takes on many roles, some of which never existed before: evangelist, **theologian**, **church founder**, advisor, and interim pastor. He is multifaceted and very complicated and at times, like Peter, **overbearing**. But, this is the effect that God has on individuals.

And, that brings us to the message for us today: Even though we rarely think about it, this type of transformation is not limited to events of 2000 years ago. Indeed, it is not a thing of the past, but part of the **continuing story** of the church, especially today.

The words of Jesus to Simon Peter and his brother, Andrew were simple: **“Come and see.”** The two fishermen encounter Jesus, and they are forever transformed. They came, and they saw. And, **they listened** and heard the **Living Word**, which was Jesus before them. Things were **never the same** again.

Today we need to understand that **transformation** such as this is not an isolated event. This week and throughout this semester in the campus ministries at Clemson, Furman, Wofford, and elsewhere **young people** who have never attended worship come to know scripture and see **faith lived out** among their peers guided by ordained pastors who are called to this particular form of ministry. The numbers in these groups are fairly small: about 12- 25. But, ten years ago, the numbers were 6 or 8. The students who attend included the faithful Presbyterians who were confirmed as teens in their local congregations, just as they always have.

But, today the greater numbers engaged in campus ministry are students who feel **disconnected** emotionally and **spiritually** from their surroundings. Some of these young adults were brought up in congregational churches: both Baptist and evangelical. Others never attended their home churches regularly. But, many grew up entirely **outside the church**. They are united in having a **spiritual hunger** and a thirst for **deeper knowledge** and faith. They want **to serve** others. In joining our presbytery-sponsored campus ministries, they join a community of faith that is located on, or near, their campus which is open and **receptive** to them.

These are campus ministries are communities of faith which we support directly and indirectly through **Foothills Presbytery**. And, they are **making a difference** in the lives of these students who have seen what a life in Christ can mean and what it can provide in spiritual support, emotional comfort, and the peace only found in God through Jesus Christ. This is what can happen when we accept a diversity of individuals **right where they are**. This is the **power of Christ** in our lives and in **our living**.

As we prepare for Lent, **come and see** what Christ has offered you. In this time before Easter, are you and I open to the ultimate gift of God’s grace, God’s love, and the everlasting peace which is like no other- in Jesus Christ?