

“Seeking Jesus”

(Pointing to “something”): Would you look at that?!?

The child in me wants to say, “*Made you look!*” The reality is that, when someone alerts your attention to something, the natural inclination is to take a look. But: “*Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s Superman!*” At that, you probably do not scan the heavens. You have heard it before and know that it is not real. But if your spouse, or child, or grandchild comes running in the house panting, “*You’ve gotta come see this!*”— you go to take a look. You have no idea what “this” is. Yet because of the excitement of the one you do know and care about is so pronounced, you suspend any and all skepticism and you go.

Or, if on the local news you hear that there will be an unusual event in the evening sky — a meteor shower, an eclipse of the moon, the *Aurora Borealis* — you may venture onto your back porch to catch a glimpse (unless, of course, the event takes place at 2:30 in the morning when only crazy people like me would be up).

Giving heed to the excitement of others is a natural and very human thing to do. Of course, you can get “burned” and no longer respond in a favorable way. The fable of the boy who cried “*Wolf!*” brings us the message that we had better mean what we say and say what we mean if we want people to pay heed. But when we are alerted by another to something they think will benefit us to see, we are inclined to take a look.

In today’s Gospel, John the Baptist is excited. That excitement may not have come through as I read it just a moment ago but it is there. The excitement is there because of the Baptist’s very recent experience. Of the four Gospels, John’s is the only one that does not record a narrative of Jesus’ baptism. John records an eyewitness testimony to the event — the eye witness being John the Baptist.

The Baptist has the excitement that only an eyewitness can put forth. When something truly wondrous has taken place, others may say to you, “*Did you hear about . . .?*” But the eyewitness to the event will absolutely gush with the excitement that was the event — “*You shoulda been there!*”

It was awesome!”

That’s the Baptist in today’s account: **“I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.”** *“I saw it! I didn’t just hear about it. I was there! It took place right in front of me!”* You’ve had experiences like that, haven’t you? Do you know how many people actually witnessed the perfect game pitched by the Indians’ Lenny Barker in 1981? I watched it on TV (does that count?), which is something of a miracle because baseball didn’t then have a blackout rule. Had there been a blackout because of attendance? The eyewitness pool would have shrunk to about 10,000 because the stadium that night was less than one-third filled. At last count, however, more than 634,000 fans claim to have been there. As one fan who was there says: *“I actually WAS at the game, and have the ticket framed in glass to prove it...”* Can you hear the difference between my, *“I watched it on TV,”* and that fan’s, *“I actually WAS at the game . . .”*?

Why is the Baptist so excited? It is linked to expectation. He reports, **“I myself did not know him . . .”** We may take pause at that and wonder how it is that John did not know his cousin, Jesus. Recognize that John is not saying he had no knowledge of Jesus, but that he had not realized who Jesus really was. It’s kind of the reverse of the neighbor of the serial killer who tells the reporter, *“Well he was always kind of a quiet kid. I have a hard time believing it was him.”* We can almost hear John’s amazement: **“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.’”** Then Jesus comes, is baptized, the Spirit descends, and John stands there going: *“You? You’re the one? You?”* Once over the initial shock, John is totally blown away.

But notice: John had been told what to look for, and when he saw it, the reaction was one of exultation. Why is it important that we recognize that John is excited about his witness? Because such excitement is transferrable. The followers of John to whom he gives his testimony get caught up in it.

Theirs is not the response of Mr. Spock, *“Fascinating!”* — which has all

the emotive content of reading a Wendy's Value Meal menu. As soon as John says, ***“Look, here is the Lamb of God!”*** they look and go to follow Jesus. Something in John's attitude sparked in them a desire to have more of Jesus.

When Jesus sees them following, He turns to them to ask, ***“What are you looking for?”*** Let's make sure we understand that Jesus has not taken on the DeNiro role from Taxi Driver (*“You lookin' at me?”*). This is the gentle opening to the honest seeker: What are you looking for? It goes to heart of longing, desire, hope, and expectation. It is, indeed, the foundational question of faith: What are you looking for?

The answer to that question speaks volumes.

Some people are seeking religion. They want some system that will tell them how to live their lives so that they can have security. So they come to value rules, regulations, structure, laws, codes, and formulas. Many seek out principles for behavior so they can conform and fit in. It is a model based on mastery— if I can just get it right, I will be okay. The problem is that such a spirit of religion is dependent on just one person: me. It is a model based on information and intellect; very left-brain.

Jesus welcomes these disciples of John because they want to know where He is staying. I don't know if you've ever recognized this, but if you listen to our black brothers and sisters you will not hear them speak about where they live; usually it is about where they stay. It suggests a lack of permanence, which is in many cases likely the truth.

The Greek word used in the Gospel of John is μένω (meno), which means “to abide, to take up residence;” it absolutely reeks with permanence.

To seek out Jesus is simultaneously to know (at least) three things:

First, to know that He is something special (“The Lamb of God”) and therefore worth seeking after;

Second, to know that you will find in Him rest and security;

Third, to know that in Him all your core longings will be met: significance, purpose, understanding, security, love, belonging, all of them.

This “knowing” is not informational, it is transformational. It does not come from the realm of facts and information; it comes from episodic encounters with Christ that change how you see yourself, God, and the world.

Note what it does for Andrew. He spends just the last part of the day with Jesus, maybe a few hours at most, and is impelled to tell his brother, Simon, all about it. Note that Andrew does not minimize his own experience (“*Simon, wanna come see something kinda nice?*”) but, transformed in the presence of Jesus he announces: “***We have found the Messiah!***” This is not mastery; this is mystery — Jesus invites us to come and see where He abides so that we can abide in Him. Not by rules and regulations, but in relationship . . . in love. It depends not at all on you or on me; it comes completely from Him.

Andrew and the other disciple of the Baptist were positioned for this encounter with Jesus; the Baptist pointed to Jesus and announced who He is. We have had similar guides in our past — parents, teachers, pastors, friends, fellow-believers — who have provided us guidance so that we could come to Jesus. And, like Andrew, when we have encountered and come to recognize Christ for who He is, we are excited to tell others what we have found. But, as we kind of settle in to this relationship, like any relationship, we can begin to take it for granted, and we act as if we need not give it the energy and devotion we once felt.

Every relationship takes work — time and attention — to thrive. Seeking Jesus is no different. Fortunately, there are many, many disciplines and exercises we can engage that can help keep us alert and alive to deepening our relationship with Christ. Attached here is a sheet with the heading “The Examen.” The Examen is a very old spiritual discipline that has aided many saints in preparing for confession; it was a way of examining your life, not so much to become hypercritical, but to spot places in your life where sin had taken some root and thus poses a danger.

This instrument is a bit different; its goal to help you look at your life each day and seek to discover places where you do, indeed, take for granted God and Christ in your day. The questions themselves have no real significance in terms of faith; they could be asked and answered by

anybody — Christian, Jew, atheist, narcissist. If you will enter into these questions with the overarching theme of where did I encounter God in the events of the day, asking the Holy Spirit to awaken in you good vision, you may in fact discover some delightful intersections where God was present and you had not seen it.

You are aware that God is present in every moment. Every moment of every day God is making Himself known to us; only often it is hidden. One night several years ago, as I was leaving the campus at Ashland Seminary to head to my car, as soon as I stepped out of the building I was aware of the brilliant full moon on a crystal clear night (that morning, I recalled, the moon had been so bright that I had to pull down the visor on my car as I headed southwest. As I walked the sidewalk to the parking lot that night, I passed under three or four street lamps, and as I looked up standing under one of the street lamps I realized I could not see the stars or the moon. They had not hidden themselves; but the bright light that stood between me and them made it impossible to see them.

There is a lot of artificial light in our world that tends to blur or blot out the true light we need to see. We need to get to a place where we can dim those false lights and look up to see what God and Christ want us to see, and that we so desperately need to see. Take some time each day this week to raise your conscious awareness of the presence of God. Sit a while with this list of questions about the events, encounters, experiences of your day. As you answer, keep asking the root questions, *“Where was God in this? Did I see Him? How did I miss Him?”*

This is called a discipline (it is what a disciple is to be about); so it takes time and attention and practice to move through it. It does not require a PhD or a special talent pool or skill set: just time, attention, and practice.

Jesus bid the disciples of John, *“Come and see.”* He bids us to the same encounter with Him. Come to see Him, sharpen your focus, clarify your vision. Come and see the many ways, the many times, the many places, the many occasions, the many interactions, and the many encounters where Jesus can be found when you seek Him.

This Second Sunday after the Epiphany marks the beginning of what is called “Ordinary Time” on the Church Calendar. For the next five weeks,

until Ash Wednesday, there will be no festivals or special days of commemoration to observe on Sundays; it will be . . . ordinary. We need that — ordinary time to reflect, recharge, refresh, and renew ourselves and our connection with God.

Today I point you to the cross, to the font, to the altar (the Eucharistic elements), to the pulpit (and my stand) and say with John the Baptist: ***“Here is the Lamb of God.”*** I pray earnestly that you will use this ordinary time to hear Jesus’ invitation to seek Him and discover anew . . . μενω (meno), He abides in you.

Amen.