

The very next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and yelled out, "Here He is, God's Passover Lamb! He forgives the sins of the world! This is the Man I've been talking about, 'the One who comes after me but is really ahead of me.' I knew nothing about who He was - only this: that my task has been to get Israel ready to recognize Him as the God-Revealer. That is why I came here baptizing with water, giving you a good bath and scrubbing sins from your life so you can get a fresh start with God."

John clinched his witness with this: "I watched the Spirit, like a dove flying down out of the sky, making the Spirit at home in Him. I repeat, I know nothing about Him except this: The One who authorized me to baptize with water told me, 'The One on whom you see the Spirit come down and stay, this One will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' That's exactly what I saw happen, and I'm telling you, there's no question about it: *This* is the Son of God."

The next day John was back at his post with two disciples, who were watching. He looked up, saw Jesus walking nearby, and said, "Here He is, God's Passover Lamb." The two disciples heard him and went after Jesus. Jesus looked over His shoulder and said to them, "What are you after?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are You staying?" Jesus replied, "Come along and see for yourself." They came, saw where Jesus was living, and ended up staying with Him for the day. It was late afternoon when this happened.

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard John's witness and followed Jesus. The first thing he did after finding where Jesus lived was find his own brother, Simon, telling him, "We've found the Messiah" (that is, "Christ"). And Andrew immediately led him to Jesus. John 1: 29-43

Last week I was at Mt. Hermon retreat center for three days at an annual meeting with the pastors of our conference, the District Superintendents, and the Bishop. For three days we worshiped and studied scripture together. This year our guest teacher was Rev. Dr. David Vasquez-Levy, the president of the Pacific School of Religion, and our text was the book of Ruth. I know Ruth by heart and I love the it. Rev. Vasquez-Levy overlaid the book of Ruth with the current plight of world refugees, immigrants, minorities, and women. It transformed the story of Ruth as we considered that Ruth and Naomi experienced life as refugees, as religious minorities, and as women. Throughout the story, which was told by several voices reading, by liturgical dancers, and with

pictures (so that our senses were engaged by the story) we looked for God's creating, redeeming, and sustaining presence in the text. Rev. Vasquez-Levy reminded us of the power of stories... as, he said, witnessed to by the multiple millions of dollars made at movies (which is story-telling.) He said that Disney is remaking "Beauty and the Beast" because we love to hear old stories, even when we know them by heart, when they're told in a way that engages us. He said that we need to tell the ancient stories of our faith in new and engaging ways (even if we know them by heart) because they witness to the creating, redeeming, and sustaining love of God ~ and that's the story the human spirit is most hungering to hear.

On Tuesday night at Mt. Hermon our new Bishop, Minerva Carcaño, told her story about growing up as a poverty-stricken Mexican child picking cotton in Texas, and how her faith - actually she said her joy in Christ - gave her strength even in the most desperate times. Bishop Carcaño had tears in her eyes as she shared her struggles as a poor minority girl, and that knowing Jesus loved her, shaped her image of herself as a child of God. She told us about the poverty and hopelessness experienced around the world today, and even here in our own country, and said that what people are most hungry for, and most desperate to hear, is the story about the love of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Carcaño said while she's proud of how United Methodists minister to the poor, the hungry, the refugee, and the powerless... that we need to tell them about Jesus as well... because that's the story of hope and redemption that people are hungering and thirsting to hear. We need to tell the stories of our faith. We need to tell people the stories of Jesus.

Last Sunday we heard the story about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, and we were invited to come forward, to put our hands in the baptismal waters, and to renew the powerful words of our covenant to live a new life in Jesus Christ. We were reminded that like Jesus, we too are God's beloved children, and that the Spirit of God who descended on Jesus as He came up out of the Jordan River, is the same Spirit of God who dwells in us. We remembered that in the waters of baptism we have died to sin and self-centeredness, and risen to live as newly born followers of Christ. Jesus is transforming us from our old lives into a new creation, and rather than being perfect, we are now God's works in progress; like John the Baptist, pointing the way to Jesus.

The story of Jesus coming up out of the water of the Jordan River, and the Holy Spirit lighting on Him like a dove, reminds us that in the waters of baptism we too are God's own, God's beloved. Hearing that God was present at Jesus' baptism in all God's fullness - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - reminds us that God is also fully present to us, in our lives. In our ordinary and sometimes extraordinary lives ~ God is fully present. That's a wonderful story to tell.

When we listen to God's stories we have truer understanding of God (more than the culture around us, more than those who worship power and money) and we know ourselves better as God's own, beloved people.... and we come to know that all people are also God's own, God's beloved. It's important to tell God's stories, and our stories as God's people, so that these ancient words [hold up bible] breathe life. God's stories breathe life when our stories overlay God's stories... and we see, we experience, God's love and peace and forgiveness and justice; we see glorious glimpses of the Kingdom of God, right here on earth, as it is in heaven.

Today's gospel is about John the Baptist telling his story about Jesus. John's listeners became followers of Jesus... John had told his story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River in such a way that his listeners felt compelled to follow Jesus, and became the first disciples. I think the most important words in this gospel story are about seeing. Look at your bulletin and underline words like "see", "look", "saw", "watch", and "recognize". How many are there? [pause] (I count 8 in this translation.)

Would you look at page 2 of the bulletin? At the top is one of the songs we sang at the beginning of worship. I'd like us to sing it again... this time as a prayer. "Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus... to reach out and touch Him... and say that we love Him. Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen. Open our eyes, Lord... we want to see Jesus." As Bishop Carcaño said last week, this is the story - of Jesus and His love - the world is most desperate to see and hear.

John tells his story of Jesus' baptism, about the message and the dream he'd received from God, about the One who was to come... the One who would be, as John said, 'The God-Revealer.' In the waters of baptism, John saw the Holy Spirit like a dove, light upon Jesus. When he saw Jesus the following day, John said, "Here He is, God's Passover Lamb." John's listeners would have known the story of the Passover, when the doorways of the Israelites, who lived in misery and captivity as slaves to Pharaoh, were smeared with the blood of a sacrificial lamb, and their children were saved from the killing-plague the Lord sent to force the Pharaoh to free God's people. John blurted out his prophecy of Jesus - he saw Jesus, and recognized that Jesus would be a Passover lamb - the One sent to save God's people.

The people who heard John's story were captivated by it and followed Jesus. Jesus asked them, "What are you looking for?" Their response was, "Where are You staying?" and Jesus said, "Come and see."

Jesus asked those who followed Him, "What are you looking for?" Listen to Jesus ask you: "What is it - at the core of your being - that you're looking for, and longing to find? Is it hope? Is it peace? Is it joy? Is it worth?" As a follower of Jesus... take a moment to consider (and write it in the margin of your bulletin so it's not just a passing thought) - and hear Jesus ask You: What are you looking for? [pause]

The things the human soul most hungers and thirsts for are universal. We want to be loved and valued; we want our lives to matter; we want to be well and thrive; we want all children to be safe; we want to know God; we want to see Jesus. Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?" When you tell your story about Jesus, tell about something that your soul is longing for... tell about something you're looking for.

Those who followed Jesus asked Him, "Where are You staying?" Do you ask Jesus, "Where can I see You? Where can I be assured of Your presence? How can I be with You?" Take a moment and remember when You've seen, where you've experienced, Jesus; where you've been aware of His love and His kindness, where you've felt His presence. Again write down a word or a phrase to help you remember (because we are a forgetful people and we are easily distracted from the most important things in life.) [pause] Where have you met Jesus? Where have you seen and heard and felt His love? When you tell your story about Jesus tell something about where You've seen Him.

This gospel story tells us specifically that it was late in the afternoon on the day that John told his story about Jesus, and his listeners were so taken by John's witness that they followed Jesus. When you tell your story about Jesus, tell the details: about where You've seen Him in the beauty and goodness of the world, in the glory of nature, in sacrifice and service, in an answer to prayer, in experiencing that you are loved, in knowing that you are not alone.

Jesus said to those who followed Him, "Come and see." Jesus invites you to follow Him, and invites you to stay. When you tell your story about God's love it's an invitation to others to "Come and see" what life with Christ is like. On the front page of the bulletin are the words to "He Came Down"... Jesus came down that we may have love, and peace, and joy. Lasting gifts to be unwrapped and discovered every day: love, peace, and joy... not just for some, but for all the world... especially those who are hungering and thirsting... the poor, the hungry, the refugee, the minority, and all who are not seen or heard by those in power.

Our stories are not perfect and not complete... we are after all, God's work-in-progress... but our stories of Jesus and are essential for people to see and hear. And when we tell our stories of Jesus, we are inviting them to "Come and see."

John the Baptist is long gone, and yet his words, his story, draw us into God's story. And in God's story we see that we have been chosen by God to experience life in a different way. We hear that we are loved, and valued, and forgiven, and given purpose. And our purpose is to love and value and forgive all others: to help heal the brokenness of this world, to help build God's Kingdom on earth... as it is in heaven.

Let us pray.