

## **Come and See**

Psalm 146, John 1: 35-46

“Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’

Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’” John 1: 46

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For the first time since 2001, September 11<sup>th</sup> has fallen on a Sunday. We bring to worship with us today wrenching memories of a loss too deep for words. Four years ago, great clouds of dust and rubble rained on the streets and rooftops of Manhattan. America’s soul was filled with rage and grief. Four years ago, we searched through the ashes for signs that the promises that hold the world secure were still there. Today, we come to worship in the wake of another great catastrophe. Katrina has sent us on a similar search, though this time we slough through hurricane waters looking for signs of hope. As the rescue workers still make their way through the streets of New Orleans and coastal Mississippi and Alabama, we too are working our way through a great confusion of thoughts and feelings. The tools we have to work with are nothing more or less than words, and particularly the words of our faith tradition, words that have comforted and consoled and corrected God’s people for thousands of years.

“...though the earth should change and the mountains shake at the heart of the sea, the Lord of Hosts is with us.”

“Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. . .The Lord watches over the stranger and upholds the orphans and the widow. . .The Lord will reign forever and ever. Your God, O Zion, for all generations.”

These are promises that we know by our faith and that we hold onto for dear life in chaotic and troubled times. By faith, we know that neither terrorist attacks nor deadly hurricanes can change the fact that God is still God, that the world is still the locus of God’s saving grace, and that God’s concern for the vulnerable will last forever.

In the weeks and months ahead, our nation will have to engage in the kind of soul searching it has not done in a very long time. Why did so many have to wait so long for help? Why were the most vulnerable, the elderly, the children, the poor, why were they the ones who were so often forgotten or left behind? How shall we respond to the deep fissures of race and class that the breaking of the levy exposed for all the world to see? These are the questions that we must address with candor and with courage if America is to move to a higher moral ground.

It will be tempting, to give in to bitterness and ill-will. But let me tell you from this pulpit, today that neither bitterness nor ill-will will build a more just America. You know the expression, “Don’t let it get the best of you.” Think of that literally. The best of us can be eaten away by resentment and blame, and then all we are left with is a hard heart out of which nothing good can come. Yes, we must figure out who failed the people of New Orleans and the coastal areas of Alabama and Mississippi. They were terribly, terribly failed. We must assign responsibility. But what a shame it would be if our nation descended into bitter waters. What a shame that would be in light of the tremendous good that has been done in the last fourteen days, as an unprecedented spirit of compassion, generosity and sacrifice has washed across our nation. It occurred to me yesterday that we have been focused in recent months on a debate about whether the Ten Commandments should be posted in courthouses and school rooms, and how silly that debate appears in light of the fact that millions of Americans decided willingly and sacrificially to obey the commandment that Christ called the greatest commandment: to love God with all your heart and your neighbor as much as yourself.

The images of that neighbor love will be forever etched in our minds:

The rescue worker on the ropes suspended above the floodwaters, the arms of the terrified little girl wrapped tightly around his neck.

A desperate firefighter chopping through the roof of a house where a whole family was trapped in the attic, only their heads above water.

The young mother in Gulfport swimming through the raging waters, deeper than the rooftops, to rescue her neighbors, two elderly gentlemen who were about to drown. “Why did you do it?” the television reporter asked her.

She looked at him. “If I hadn’t done it, they would have died.”

There you go, love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. And the churches, my goodness, the church people. The shelters and blankets and baby food and offers of living room sofas to sleep on and gallons of hot coffee and thousands of plates of scrambled eggs and bacon and toast.

One of my most vivid Katrina memories will be that of about ten of you last Thursday evening sorting and labeling the massive amounts of clothes and supplies that had been brought to Morningside for hurricane relief. Blue jeans, blouses, baby clothes, all stacked in the hall that you just walked down to come to worship. My favorite Morningside memory, post-Katrina, will not be of something I saw, however, but something I took in by ear—a cell phone conversation between our wonderful mission mother Leslie Allen and me. “Where are you going, Les?” I asked her.

“I’m going to Grady to get our family!” You would have thought that she had won the lottery. It turns out that our church was the first one in Atlanta to say yes to the plea to helping those from the hurricane area who had fled to our city with medical problems. The problem, in this case, turned out to be a blessing in the form of a new born baby named Lewis Foster, Jr.

Listen; there is much that divides the Christian community in America, today. We argue over theology and ecclesiology and missiology, but it appears that most of us agree on at least one thing, and that is that Jesus really meant what he was saying when he said, “When you have done it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me.”

After 9/11, someone sent me words of wisdom that I have held onto ever since: “Whoever desires to see the living Lord face to face should not seek Him in the empty firmament but in human love.”

My plan originally for this Sunday was to preach a sermon on evangelism. Friends, this **is** a sermon on evangelism. This is a sermon about the Good News of the saving grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and recognizable in acts of human kindness done by people of goodwill. “Come and see,” Jesus said to his first disciples, “Come and see.” Evangelism is not merely about speaking the good news; it is about living out, just as Jesus did, the justice and the compassion of God. I cannot remember a time in my ministry when I have seen the church be the church, or realized that the Spirit of the living God was alive in the world, more than in these recent days.

A man named Philip found a man named Nathanael and said, “We have found the one that we have been waiting for.”

Nathanael, understandably skeptical, asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth, an undistinguished little community in those days.

And Philip said, “Come and see.”

Can anything good come out of a relatively small congregation, behind the trees on North Morningside Drive? You just come and see. You come and see the power of compassion, the can-do attitude, the willingness to praise God in all circumstances.

Do you know that the entire Christian enterprise would have ended up in the ditch of history if those very first followers of Jesus had kept their mouths shut about their happy discovery? Please note that there was no coercion by Jesus or even by his soon-to-be disciples, no doorbell ringing, no pamphlet passing, and no disrespect for others, just an invitation issued in a broken world where it is so hard to find a reason to have hope when there is so much inhumanity: Come and

see a community where there is genuine respect for the human dignity of another person. Come and see.

Last fall at a Presbytery meeting, I heard a Lutheran bishop say that the average Lutheran invites someone to come to church every twenty-four years. I do not know when you last invited someone to come and see, to come and hear a message that God has not forgotten the widow and the orphan.

I don't know about you but I can't do without the faith community these days. I need to have a tangible reminder that divine love, justice and compassion will have the last word in God's world because this is God's world.

The cynic would say there is no hope. The atheist would say there is no God. The Christian church would say that while ours is a broken, and apparently God-forsaken, world appearances can be deceiving. God has not abandoned creation but continues to act redemptively within it. And for all our sin, for all our indifference, for all our hard-heartedness, for all of us who have walked by neighbors in need and said, "I've got to take care of myself and my family," there's one coming our way. John the Baptist said of him, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." In other words, we get a fresh start every day.

A week ago, I was on Cumberland Island, a wildlife refuge just off the coast of GA. After we had finished our dinner, a young woman just out of college came by where we were staying and said, "Come with me. I have a bucket, and in my bucket are twenty baby loggerhead turtles that have been rescued from a nest that was being violated." In the dark we went down the path and onto the beach, and Bethany, the young woman, put each one of them down on the sand. They were no bigger than a pancake. They looked so vulnerable and confused. Bethany wouldn't let them get lost. When they started heading in the wrong direction, she would just turn those little babies around and get them going in the right direction again. If those turtles are lucky, they might live eighty to one hundred years in the deep blue sea.

I don't like it when evangelism is about coercing people to accept Christ. But I love it when it is about answering "the natural genetic need we have for communion with the power that gives and sustains life." (J. Edward Carothers, *The Paralysis of Mainline Protestant Leadership*, p.129)

There are all sorts of way to be human, but there is only one way that will save the world. "Come and see," Jesus said to his disciples long ago. Here and now, he says it again to you and to me. "Come and see," the hurt stops here. The hope starts here. My friends, come and see.