

Dwelling in Christ is What We Seek

By: Stephanie Doeschot

January 19, 2020. Wouldn't we love for all the sin of the world to just disappear? Pastor Stephanie's sermon on this celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday is on Jesus' first two disciples, who were hopeful that he would take away the sin of the world.

*** Transcript ***

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I have a question for you. Have you found what you're looking for? There's a song by the Irish rock band U2 that begins with these words: "I have climbed the highest mountains / I have run through the fields / . . . / But I still haven't found / What I'm looking for." I'm sure some of you could sing that right along. It repeats many times, "And I still haven't found what I'm looking for." That song has a haunting quality to it. Its popularity seems to suggest that it hit a very responsive chord with the wonderings of many. Most days, we are busy enough with just doing what is necessary for the time being. It's not until a question like this is posed to us, or we are reminded through song or through other thoughts that come to us, that we realize that it's a question tugging at our hearts. Have we found what we're looking for?

In today's gospel, we are back in the same location as we were last week, with John the Baptist and Jesus being baptized and hearing the words, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." That was the Gospel of Matthew. But in this week's gospel reading from the Gospel of John, we again have John the Baptist. But this time he is still watching and waiting for the messiah, the anointed one of God, whom he is looking for. He'd been told that he would find what he was looking for by baptizing -- that when the right one arrived, the Spirit would descend and remain on him. "I myself did not know him," John says. "But the one who sent me to baptize with water said, 'The one on whom you see the spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' "

Can you just picture John the Baptist standing waist-deep in the Jordan River, looking intently at each person who comes to him for baptism, searching for some glimmer of divinity? And then when they come up out of the water, looking toward heaven to see if this will be the one on whom the Spirit descends and remains, always seeking to discover if he has at last found what he is looking for? It's kind of like panning for gold in some ways. You've seen pictures of this, or maybe some of you have done this on vacation out West. You scoop up a pan full of sand and gravel from the bottom of a creek and swirl it around, hoping that the sand and gravel will slosh out and some heavier gold will actually settle on the bottom. On a good day you might actually see a few flecks of gold in your pan. But of course, what you're really hoping for is a big, solid nugget the size of a golf ball. When Jesus appears before John for baptism, it is like John scooped up a nugget the size of a bowling ball. John's heart and mind are fully engaged. This is the one that we've been looking for.

Of course, he can't keep this good news to himself. The next day, two of his disciples are standing there with him. When he sees Jesus walking by he says to them, "Look, the Lamb of

God who takes away the sin of the world." And immediately they leave John and start following Jesus. (I might say parenthetically here that we'll be singing "Lamb of God" twice this Sunday. We always sing it during communion, but it was chosen for the gospel acclamation because it shows that this is lifted right out of scripture. Just in case you ever wonder where some of the liturgy comes from, it pretty much follows what is scriptural. And this is one of the things that we get to celebrate in a big way today.) But now these disciples leave John -- and they've been his disciples -- and they start following Jesus. I wonder though, how closely they dared to follow him?

That they were intrigued and hopeful that Jesus would indeed take away the sin of the world is understandable. Wouldn't we love for all the sin of the world to just disappear? It's just too much to handle, all the bad news reports of violence and hatred that we receive. But what if they were realistic enough to know that there was plenty of sin within them? And if Jesus would zap away all the sin in the world, well, maybe they'd better follow from a distance. I know that I might want to leave some space between Jesus and me if I were in their situation, not knowing how he was going to take away the sin of the world. He might want to deal with me and my sin in a way that's uncomfortable. At some point Jesus turns around and asks them, "What are you looking for?" Instead of answering him, they come up with a seemingly odd question for him. Was it out of nervous energy that they just blurted out, "Rabbi, where are you staying?"

Is the best answer they can come up with a question like "What hostel are you staying at tonight?" No, not really. They really are kind of answering Jesus' question by wondering if he is the one that they want to be following. They don't literally mean, where will you be sleeping? They are asking about his nature, his very identity. The Greek word "meno" is used here, and it's used frequently throughout the Gospel of John. It occurs something like 40 times, and every time it means some version of "to abide," "to remain," "to stay with," "to dwell within." Meno is what Jesus uses when he speaks of himself, later on in John, abiding in the Father, and the disciples abiding in him. It's the same word Jesus uses when he talks about the vine and the branches in chapter 15: "Whoever abides in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit."

To use preacher Tom Long's words, in essence the two disciples were asking Jesus, "Rabbi, who are you? Where is the home, the center of your life?" So you can think of it like this: when Jesus asked them, "What are you seeking?" they responded, "We are seeking a meaningful place in which our lives can dwell, they can take root, they can be at peace, they can be at home. Is that in you?" "Come and see," Jesus says. Come and see. "Come and see," Jesus says. "Come and dwell close to me, and I will show you, I will transform you with Epiphany eyes. You will see the reality of my kingdom." This story is compelling, because if we're honest with ourselves, we'll see that (seven words) dwelling in Christ is what we seek. We might feel quite at home in our lives, but any restlessness that we have, or thirst for deeper meaning that we experience, or longing for a centeredness to tie up the loose ends, reveals that deep down we are longing to be at home more fully with Jesus. Being part of the church means we are looking for the community of people with whom we can abide in God's presence. Being at home here means we can inhale God's grace and remember whose we are, as well as remember that we do not seek that home alone, but rather with each other. Like the first two disciples, we are here because we are seeking our home in Jesus. And we've heard him say, "Come and see." And so we follow Christ together because dwelling in Christ is what we seek.

As we grow in making our dwelling or our home in Jesus, remaining or abiding in him, we will certainly have moments when we rest in the truth that we are deeply loved and claimed. After all, we are the beloved children of God. But we'll also find that we'll have moments when we are called to account by the gospel, by the one who makes his home within us, for that which needs to be set right. He takes away the sin of the world all right. His body and blood are given for us for the forgiveness of sin. As we abide in him, he abides in us. He cleans us up from the inside out. As we dwell in him, he makes us aware of the judgments of others that we make, of how we use our resources, for the words that we use in speaking about and to each other, for the times that we were silent and should not have been, as well as for the times we used our voices when we should have remained quiet. As we keep following the call to seek our home in Jesus, like those very first two disciples, we will be challenged to change. And that challenge will never stop. In a sense, we are continually looking for him, for more of him. When we live our lives as those who seek our home in Jesus, that means we live our lives always on the way, always continuing to learn how to better reflect Jesus in this world, working for mercy, love, and justice for all people. Seeking to be home in Jesus will comfort us when we are afflicted. But make no mistake about it, it will afflict us whenever we become too comfortable and complacent. That is something that must be somewhere in the gospel's job description. Being at home with Jesus is wonderfully fulfilling, but it comes at a price of being ever re-created and made new by his very presence.

Now this weekend, as you know, we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. Dr. King was a preacher who knew the comfort found in seeking his home in Jesus. Being at home in Jesus centered him in a profound way, and gave him a love for others and a way of leading with non-violence that demonstrated the gospel for all to see, who would be able to see and comprehend. At the same time, being at home with Jesus, or abiding in him, took him to the places where Jesus dared to walk: right into the face of cruelty and injustice and hatred, in order to challenge its right to exist. As Dr. King wrote letters from his cell in Birmingham jail, far from his physical home with his family, he could still be at home with Jesus. He writes this in one of those letters: "We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. There is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy . . . Now is the time to make [racial] justice a reality for all of God's children . . . The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges." He could have written that yesterday.

At the 2019 ELCA churchwide assembly, if you keep up with some of those documents and pronouncements, the fact that the ELCA is 96% white was addressed. So a paper, which was long conceived and carefully written, was presented and adopted. It was called a "Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity within the ELCA." On all levels, leaders and churches are seeking ways to achieve ethnic diversity. When we take the time to listen and learn about the ways that people of color have experienced church life with us, we realize that we have a lot of room for growth, those of us from European backgrounds. If you read the latest issue of "Living Lutheran" magazine you came across an article entitled "Unpacking white privilege: the important work of making the church less harmful." If you have not read it, I encourage you to do so. Included in your bulletin you'll find a page taken from this article. It starts with bold letters saying, "As a

European American in the ELCA," and followed by 26 items that are thought-provoking and should be conscience-pricking for all of those of us in the European American category. I invite you to take it home and look it over, thinking what it must be like for people of color to deal with some of the issues that are highlighted there. It's a call to awareness. If what we are looking for is a fuller expression and experience of God's kingdom among us, then this and so many other things can send us in the right direction. To be at home with Jesus is to dare to take on large challenges by following his lead through them. It's not always comfortable, but its presence within us takes us to where he is. And he is always shining light in darkness. To be a member of the St. Louis community is to recognize that the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, is to be found working to uproot racism and to replace it with love and care for all of God's people. If we want to come and see where he is, we will find him there. We will also find him everywhere there's a need for his light to shine, bringing hope, forgiveness, and restoration for any number of needs.

So what are you looking for? The good news is we don't need to keep wondering and waiting to find the hope of the world. He has come and he is among us. His call to the early disciples is the call to us: will we come and follow him? He is calling our names. And following him and dwelling in him as he dwells within us will never be the same, as goes the song we are going to use today for our hymn of the day. So, please rise to sing "Will You Come and Follow Me?"

*** Keywords ***

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