

Sermon for Sunday, January 15, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Did you notice anything different
about our gospel reading today?
Anything that distinguishes it
from the vast majority of gospel readings
we have at church?

It's from the gospel of John.

Our readings
are on a three year cycle.
And each year, we focus on a particular gospel.
Matthew, which is this year.
Mark,
Luke.
But John gets left out.
I'm not quite sure why this tradition
began.
Perhaps it's because
Matthew, Mark, and Luke
all tell the story of Jesus
the same way,
talking about what he said and did,
kind of biography style.
They have some of the same sources;
they overlap in lots of places.
And they are pretty straightforward in the way
that they tell the story, allowing it
to gradually unfold.

But John is different.
John's way of telling the story
is to continually go over the meaning
of everything Jesus does
and says,
and most importantly of all

who Jesus is.

You can see it from the very beginning of the gospel.
Where Matthew and Luke begin
with the stories of Jesus' birth,
and Mark begins
with John the Baptist,
John begins
with something that is almost poetry.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

And perhaps that's why
we only read the gospel of John
in small chunks,
inserted here and there
in the midst of our readings of the other gospels.
Because John's gospel
is so rich, so full of meaning,
that we can only digest
a little
at a time.

And so today
we're taking an excursion into
the gospel according to St John.
And we arrive
late in chapter one.

Chapter one
of the gospel of John
is a chapter
of introductions.

First
it is the Word,

the Word who is with God
and is God.
who is the life
and the light
of all people.

And next
it is John the Baptist,
and to save confusion
with the one whose name is give to this gospel,
we'll just call him the Baptizer
but this time introduced
not as a crazy man out in the wilderness, as the other gospels do,
but as someone sent by God
to testify,
to bear witness,
to the one who is the life and the light.

And then John
goes back to the Word
this time is introduction taking us further,
the Word
coming into the world,
and offering to those
who believe
the chance to become
the children of God.
And this Word, this Word
becomes flesh,
becomes human,
and as such
shows us
God.

This is the one
who will point the way.
This is the one
who will show you
God.
Two introductions

that describe
the whole of the rest
of the gospel.

And then John turns
to telling the story,
but always telling it with an eye
to introductions,
to pointing the way
to God.

And John begins again
with the Baptizer
crying in the wilderness
in fulfilment
of the prophets,
and then Jesus
appears on the scene,
at first only
in the distance.

There is no third party account
of the Baptizer
baptizing Jesus,
just the baptizer's own recollection
of what happened,
and what it was all about,
pointing to Jesus in the distance
and introducing him
to anyone who would listen.
And the words he uses
to introduce Jesus
are important, important
to anyone
who had grown up
in the Jewish tradition.
This, he says,
is the Lamb of God.

And you can imagine their minds going up to Jerusalem
to the temple
where a lamb was sacrificed
every morning and every evening,
and the lamb that was sacrificed
a Passover,
and the ram and goats
sacrificed at Yom Kippur,
sacrifices that made tangible
that the relationship
between God and his people,
and in this person, John is saying,
in this person
those sacrifices are embodied,
bringing forgiveness.
And this person, he continues, this person
is the Son of God.

And at the end
as Jesus stands before Pilate
the crowds shout out,
“Crucify him! Crucify him!”
And when Pilate asks,
“Why?”
they answer,
“he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.”

Son of God
who is to die.
Lamb of God
who takes away the sin of the world.

All this prefigured
in the Baptizer’s
introduction.

And it’s an introduction
that he uses more than once.
Because a day later,
the Baptizer sees Jesus again,

just walking by.

This time
the Baptizer has two of his own followers
with him.

“Look,” he says to them,
“Here is the lamb of God”

And his two followers,
his two friends,
they look at him,
and look at Jesus,
and then
they begin
to trail after Jesus.

And Jesus notices them
and asks
what they’re looking for.
And you’d think they’d ask,
“The Baptizer told us
that you’re the lamb of God,
and we
are kind of confused,
and so we thought if we came after you
we might be able to work out
what he was talking about.”

But instead they say,
“Teacher, where are you staying?”
What?
Are they planning to stalk him?

But his response
his response
is gracious
and welcoming.
“Come with me.
Come and see.”

And they go with him,
and hang out with him for the rest of the day,
and somewhere in the midst of all of that,
one of the two, the one called Andrew,
goes and finds his brother Simon.
“I’ve met the Messiah, the chosen one, the great prophet.
Come and see!”

And he brings his brother
and introduces him to Jesus,
and Jesus looks at his brother,
and says,
“You will be called
Peter.”

It’s a story
of introductions.

John the gospeller
introduces the Baptizer
who introduces
Jesus
who is introduced to Simon.

And each time, each time,
someone’s life
is changed.
Because the Baptizer
is changed
by being called to be a prophet
and he is changed
when he introduces his disciples to Jesus,
and they leave him
and follow Christ,
and their lives are changed
when they begin to talk with Jesus,
and Simon’s life is changed
when Andrew introduces him to Jesus
and that change is marked
by his change

of name.

And it's the pattern of the gospel.
People are introduced to, they meet
Jesus
and their lives are changed.
There's Nicodemus coming by night,
who is to be born again
and the woman at the well
who finds living water,
and Lazarus,
who is brought back to life.
It's the pattern of the gospel
and it's the pattern of our faith.

We meet Jesus
and our lives
are changed.

You might remember that there was a tradition for many years
of taking on a name at your confirmation,
a new name
to mark you as a follower of Christ.
A new name
to mark you as having met Jesus
and having had your life changed.

This weekend
we remember Martin Luther King.
He is best known
for his leadership of the civil rights movement,
but often we forget
that his work was grounded in his faith.
He wasn't someone
who are up expecting to be a minister.
At the age of 13
he renounced some core Christian doctrines.
And yet, as he struggled with the faith,
he came to the conclusion
that the Bible had "many profound truths which one cannot escape."

And that led him to an inner urge
to serve humanity,
and the conclusion that the church offered him
the most effective way to respond

King was introduced to Jesus
and it changed his life.

And in a sermon at Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, in Chicago in August 1967
he said,

“And I’ll tell you, I’ve seen the lightning flash. I’ve heard the thunder roll. I felt sin-
breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to
fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. No,
never alone. He promised never to leave me, (Never) never to leave me alone.

And I’m going on in believing in him. (Yes) You’d better know him, and know his name,
and know how to call his name. (Yes) You may not know philosophy. You may not be
able to say with Alfred North Whitehead that he’s the Principle of Concretion. You may
not be able to say with Hegel and Spinoza that he is the Absolute Whole. You may not be
able to say with Plato that he’s the Architectonic Good. You may not be able to say with
Aristotle that he’s the Unmoved Mover.

But sometimes you can get poetic about it if you know him. You begin to know that our
brothers and sisters in distant days were right. Because they did know him as a rock in a
weary land, as a shelter in the time of starving, as my water when I’m thirsty, and then
my bread in a starving land. And then if you can’t even say that, sometimes you may
have to say, "he’s my everything. He’s my sister and my brother. He’s my mother and my
father." If you believe it and know it, you never need walk in darkness.”

King was introduced to Jesus
and it changed his life.

And it can change our lives too,
if we’re willing to come see Jesus,
to meet him
where he is already at work
and allow him
to change our lives.

Come and see!