



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church

“I Came, I Saw, I....”

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Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 1:29-42

Preachers are advised not to use words from languages other than the language of the land in which they are preaching. It seems that if they do, then they are thought to be showing off and distancing themselves from their congregation. Since I am unfettered—sadly, I believe—by the ability to speak fluently a language other than English, this fact has meant that the congregations I have served have been spared the need to translate and the need to judge.

But for those of us who were exposed at some time in our lives to languages other than our native tongue, even though fluency never resulted, some phrases and contexts and meanings of words linger, perhaps for a lifetime. One such phrase that has stayed with me comes from Latin. It was spoken by Julius Caesar after a military victory 47 years before the birth of Christ, and has been kept alive by an opera by Handel, a pop song from the 1940's, the Broadway musical *Mame*, the movie *Ghostbusters* and the rapper Jay-Z. I refer to the phrase “*veni, vidi, vici*,” which means “I came, I saw, I conquered.”

Caesar's use of the phrase was to tell the Roman Senate and the citizens of Rome the outcome of a battle. My use is to engage us in this morning's scripture lesson from the gospel of John. As you who have had a chance to look at the bulletin know, the sermon title varies a bit from Caesar's linguistic shorthand. Instead of stating triumphantly “I came, I saw, I conquered,” it has a pause after the third “I” indicated by a series of dots. By dropping the word “conquered,” the sermon title is meant to open us to potential responses to Jesus as he invites us, as he invited two early disciples, to “come and see” him in all his manifestations. Its intent is to indicate the questions, the choices, the dilemmas, the possibilities coming and seeing Christ elicits in each of us.

Gospel writer John presents in veiled ways the people he wishes to carry the story line of his gospel. Unlike the Gospel of Luke, where the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus is made clear, and Matthew's Gospel, where John recognizes Jesus before the baptism, John's gospel presents John the Baptist as not knowing who Jesus is. But no matter what gospel we might be reading, we can say that Jesus is elusive. We might say coming and seeing Jesus is more like trying to catch up with a moving object than finding a stationary position with predictable coordinates on a map.

A mark of recognition of what it is like to come and see Jesus seems to begin when we realize that we are not so much able to capture Jesus as to await the essence of Jesus capturing us, so that we in turn might respond in Christ-motivated rather than human-driven ways.

Returning to this morning's scripture, we remember that John the Baptist's public ministry was underway before that of Jesus. He had quite a following. But far from encouraging any claims to messiahship, John differentiates himself and the act of baptism he performs from

how Messiah will act. He declares that the one who will come and be Messiah will rank far above him, so far above him that he, John, will be unworthy to untie the thong of his sandal.

John's "come and see" moment is recorded this way: John points to Jesus as they come together, and he says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" He then testifies to the differences between them: "...I came baptizing with water... 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" John concludes by saying, "And I myself have seen and" (filling in the dots in his life after "I came" and I saw,") John says, "(I) have testified that this is the Son of God."

The next day, the passage tells us, John stayed true to his response of testifying to others who Jesus was by saying to two of his disciples as Jesus walked by, "Look, here is the Lamb of God." What this suggests is John could never boast like Caesar "I came, I saw, I conquered." Rather, his shorthand message to the world, which we might say became his epitaph, was "I came, I saw, I witnessed to the true Messiah."

Those of you who know John the Baptist's ultimate fate—death by beheading prompted by his truth telling about shenanigans among members of the royal family—know that for John, his witness came at a steep price. Not only did he lose the chance to have a following. He gave up his following, and finally his life, by witnessing to the true king, Jesus.

One of John's followers who left to become a disciple of Jesus was Andrew. Why? Probably not only because of John's pointing him that way but also because he was looking for something but not exactly sure what. I can relate to that. Can you? There are times in our life we have reached a plateau. We believe there is more. We just don't know what it is. But we do know that we need to go and find out what it is. We crave for an emptiness gnawing within us to be filled.

In the case of Andrew and his companion, they literally began to follow Jesus when he turned and asked them, "What are you looking for?" Jesus answers his own question for them with an offer that transcends trivial knowledge concerning where Jesus was laying his head that night. Jesus, by saying just three words—"Come and see"—invites them to experience life as they never before had know before: full of meaning and potential and life-changing possibilities that only he can offer.

The gospel of Jesus does not spread because of military superiority of one group over another or because of political intrigue or economic might or magical spirits. It spreads because one person learns that another has a hunger for deeper meaning in life and invites that person suffering from spiritual malnutrition to come and see how Jesus can fill that emptiness. In the specific case of Andrew, he acted on Jesus' invitation to "Come and see" by signing on as a disciple of Jesus and by bringing his brother Simon Peter to Jesus.

The scriptural text portrays a very believable scene between the two brothers. Andrew does not appear to suffer any psychological angst over what his brother might say or do. He does not give any lengthy introduction to the subject. Rather, after he came and after he saw Jesus, he went to Simon and witnessed to his brother in this way: "We have found the Messiah." He continued his witness by bringing Simon to Jesus.

In their own words, Andrew might have sent home the message "I came, I saw, I said 'yes' to being a disciple of Jesus, and I acted out my discipleship by bringing my brother to Jesus." As for Simon Peter's report, it might have been something like, "I came to Jesus (thanks

to Andrew); I saw how others were coming to Jesus and bringing still others; I ...let's see... received a new name that means 'rock' which I think means Jesus has something planned for me, and...well..., I am certainly learning what it means to be a disciple of this Jesus.”

This morning's scripture tells of how three people's lives were changed when they came and saw Jesus and everything that meant for them and their time. Two thousand years have come and gone. Billions of people now populate the earth. Some, like John the Baptist, have known their role in the Jesus saga and lived and died reflecting his divinity in their lives. Others, like Andrew, have been honest brokers between Jesus and those whose lives become profoundly touched by Jesus and his gospel. Still others, like Peter, have had a rocky journey understanding their role in the divine-human drama, the demands Jesus places on those who claim his cause, the disappointment and grief we can bring Jesus and others by our failings, and, at the same time, the grace and joy we can give when we come, see and follow faithfully.

What about you? What about me? What are the words that describe us after the third “I” in the phrase Caesar made famous? No doubt the words will be different for different ones of us. They will be different at different times in our lives. As we prepare to choose the word that best expresses our response to the invitation of Jesus to come and see and respond to what he is doing in the world, in our church, in our own lives, a legitimate question lurks. It is “What kind of Jesus should we come and see?” What kind of Jesus might we expect?”

The Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall suggests that we not look for an overly divine Jesus, an overly conquering Jesus, an overly judging Jesus or an overly accepting Jesus. They all are too easily distorted. Rather, Hall points us to the transforming Christ. The Christ who transforms is the one that allows the world and we who dwell here on earth to change, to turn to more lofty goals, to reorient our lives and the communities in which we live. The transforming Christ allows for us, when we have moments as Peter did of getting things wrong in terms of betraying what we know we are to do and those we love, to finally get it right, be strong, courageous, bold, loving others with the heart of Christ.

Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King Day. We all know that Dr. King got some things wrong. The history books have pointed to his flaws. But we know he got the essentials of the gospel right in terms of capturing the vision Jesus had for the people of God and the realm of God.

The horrors played out in Tucson a week ago and the divisions they magnify cry out for a dream the scope and depth of Dr. King's. The content of our nation's character is rightly being called into question. The challenge is to have dreams and visions of biblical proportions. The need is to have humility like unto that of the mayor of Selma, Alabama twenty-five years after the Selma to Montgomery March of 1965. Some of you know how numbers of marchers were gunned down and how dogs attacked non-violent marchers even though civil rights legislation had already been passed by the Congress and signed into law by the President of the United States.

Noted Presbyterian preacher Tom Long says that he happened to be in Selma on the anniversary of that historic event. The mayor was the same person in both 1965 and 1990. On the platform that day along side the mayor was George Wallace, governor of Alabama during those turbulent years. Behind them both were people who had marched a quarter of a century before. The mayor looked out at the crowd and said, “Twenty-five years ago Governor Wallace and I

were wrong. We were wrong. We thought this was outside agitation—we did not know it was the coming of justice.”

Friends: it is sin that distances us from God. It is Jesus who bridges that distance by offering us the love of God, which in its fullness brings justice and peace to all God’s people. What will your answer be to the invitation of Jesus to come and see how he, the transforming Christ, might use you to transform the world?

What will your answer be?

Amen. _____

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