

St James United Church

Message for February 26, 2023

The First Sunday in Lent

“Come and See”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Genesis 2:18-24; John 1:29-39



Often the First Sunday of Lent begins with a meditation on Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. I am grateful to our Senior Choir for the introit that voiced this aspect of Lent. It grounded us in the meaning of these days, a time to join Jesus as he sought to understand what it meant to be named as God's beloved child. However, that story is not found in John, the gospel which frames the rest of this year's Lenten Sundays. So I'm grateful that in the United Church we're free to diverge from the lectionary, in this case to look not at how Matthew (or Luke or Mark) narrated what happened after Jesus' baptism, but instead to explore John's telling.

What I like most about John's story is how elements of Jesus' temptation are given new meaning by being placed into a new context. This is how I hear John's reference to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It's a short statement yet captures the underlying issue that he faced in the wilderness. The allure of material comfort, status and power are expressions of the underlying sin of the world - prideful reliance on self without thought of others. This sin is explored in what happens right after our reading from Genesis. Our first parents ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and upon doing so started the blame game. Adam pointed at Eve who in turn scapegoated the serpent. As Lamb of God, Jesus turned us back to God and to each other, ultimately from the cross, reminding us that love and not pride is life's primary value.

Jesus could do that at the end because it's how he lived his life. Loving relationships defined everything about him. We see this as John flips the gospel and shows us that we don't need to wait until the end to discover the solution to the sin of the world, Jesus restoring us to ourselves by inviting us into relationship. Consider his simple "Come and see" to the disciples. He invites them to get to know him and so to learn the way of God's kingdom. This way is really a kin-dom. It pulls us from self-reliance into interdependence. We hear this in Genesis as God looks for a companion for the first human and ends up not so much taking a rib but dividing the first human in two, the word "rib" also meaning "wing" like that of a house. The wisdom here is that we're not our full selves when we go it alone, truly whole in our relationship with others. This awareness has the power to change how the world works. The disciples understood this and so the next day they went to tell others who in turn went to tell others, to share what they had learned, that in loving and supportive relationships we become who we are meant to be.

And we discover something else in this, we discover who God is, the one at the centre of this

kin-dom. This is the core of the story because as Jesus invites them to stay with him, he's actually inviting them into relationship with God. The two disciples ask Jesus where he abides. It's the same word used of the Spirit that descended and abided with Jesus, the same again that he used on the night before his death when he invited the disciples to abide in him as he abides in God. For Jesus, being with others was a living out of his relationship with God. And why not? Inter-relationship is the heart of God. John tells us that Jesus is not just God's child but the Word Incarnate. He shares in God's life as Abba, Christ and Spirit, and wants us to share as deeply in this life as he does. So in John 14 he tells us he is "the way, the truth, and the life". We often miss the poetry and turn the "way" into a spiritual technique, "truth" into a set of beliefs, "life" into a promise of heaven. But Jesus is inviting us to draw close to him, not as the goal but as a companion who will help us discover our truest self as we grow in all of our relationships – with ourselves, with others and so also with God.

This is why prayer and reflection are key components of Lent, ways for us to grow closer to Jesus and so closer to God. Many people will make reading the bible a part of their practice for Lent. Others will seek connection in nature. Some of you may come here on Wednesdays at noon for communion and a discussion on the scriptures for the coming week. In these weeks we are looking at a series of readings from John where Jesus reveals something about who he is. As he names himself in these readings, by extension he names us too, each of us through baptism sharing in his identity, a living embodiment of his Spirit. I pray that these weeks will be a rich exploration of who we are each called to be in the images Jesus uses about himself.

But that relationship we discover with God should lead us back to each other, because we don't just express this on our own but do so most fully in the relationships we share, especially as the church, the Body of Christ. We live this most deeply in our context, and so just as we should take time to reflect on our own, I'm excited that in these weeks we also have an opportunity to reflect together as we review our Mission Articulation Profile, our MAP. As shared in this week's email and bulletin insert, the impetus for delving into our MAP is financial, but I invite you to look at this as an opportunity to discern who we're called to be in this moment of our history, to ponder where the Spirit is inviting us to serve our neighbourhood. As we do, we not only seek to embody God's kin-dom here, but we extend it into a world that desperately needs an alternative to prideful self-reliance, to discover again the gift of interdependence and how the restoration we need comes through relationships of compassion and care. I pray that these weeks also may be a time to reflect on this call and how we can embody it tangibly as a congregation and in our neighbourhood.

Beloved, today we begin the season of Lent, a time for personal reflection and for conversation with each other. As we do these things, we will come to know ourselves more deeply, exploring as Jesus did what it means to be God's children. And we will discover again that we are most fully God's children not just alone but in our relationships. Let us take time then to come and see, to abide with Jesus, and we, and everyone with us, will draw closer to the love that is God's heart. Amen.