

God's Promise of Presence

January 19, 2020 Ord 2A

Laura Smith Conrad

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

Psalm 40:1-11 a Psalm of God's faithfulness

40:1 I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

40:2 He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

40:3 He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.

40:4 Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.

40:5 You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted.

40:6 Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

40:7 Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.

40:8 I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

40:9 I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD.

40:10 I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.

40:11 Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.

John 1:29-42

1:29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

1:30 This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'

1:31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

1:32 And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

1:33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

1:34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

1:35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,

1:36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

1:37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

1:38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They

said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

1:39 Jesus said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

1:40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

1:41 He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed).

1:42 Andrew brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Proclamation of the Word

Here in an out of the way place, Jesus makes a debut to the world in the Gospel according to John. Jesus does not make his debut on the red carpet.

There is no fanfare.

Instead, he is surrounded by scrub brush and reeds, rather than gilded gold and paparazzi.

Here we are today by the Jordan river, the border between modern-day Israel and Jordan.

Folks around Jesus are washing out their clothes or getting water for the journey.

It is an ordinary day for John.

He is out there calling folks to repent and be baptized when Jesus shows up.

Look at the photo on the front of your bulletin.

It was here in a small tributary not much larger than Twelve Mile Creek,
that Jesus presents himself for baptism among the locals that day.

His appearance is subtle, understated, at best.

But it meant so much more.

Jesus' baptism in that place had great significance.

It was here that Joshua led the Israelite children across the Jordan to the Promised land to be resident aliens dependent on God.

It was here where the prophet Elijah crossed before his being taken up in a chariot of fire. (2 Kings 2:8-11).

It was a place of revelation, a place of significance.

This new Joshua, Jesus, came to save God's people.

He could have spent millions on TV ads or staged a grand kick-off event,
but it all happened in the most ordinary of ways.

When I looked up the weather of Bethany by the Jordan where we believe Jesus was baptized, the temperature was in the 50's like it was here earlier in the week.

Can you believe that the place where Jesus is baptized and introduced could have been a place just like Clemson on a Tuesday?

Just a day when people are going about their usual business.

Jesus comes into our ordinary lives, and something extraordinary happens.

It seems like no one even noticed Jesus until John points him out to a couple of his own students or disciples.

Jesus walks by as if it is just a normal day and John says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God."

In contrast, go to Dyers Diner in Pendleton most any day, and you will see Danny Ford. Everyone knows him.

No one recognizes Jesus or seems to be looking for him.

That's when Jesus arrives, on an ordinary day.

And the first words Jesus speaks in the gospel of John are, "What are you looking for?"

Jean Vanier, founder of the L'arche community, an intentional Christian community of folks living with disabilities, points out that *"These are the first words of Jesus in this gospel. Perhaps they are the first words of Jesus to each one of us. Jesus does not want to impose on us an idea or ideology. He wants people to follow him and his path of love freely. He calls us to look into our own hearts and to become aware of our fundamental desires. What do we really want for our lives?"* (Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus in the Gospel of John*)

What are you looking for? Jesus asks us.

(Ponder that)

When Jesus asks Andrew and friend, "What are you looking for?"

they respond with another question, (did you notice?) **"Where are you staying?"**

Maybe they do not really know what they are looking for.

They are unable to articulate it.

But, they have a hunch that they should stay close to Jesus;

and ultimately they will find the answer.

Another detail, the gospel writer points, out, "It was four o'clock."

On Thursday, I checked the weather.com for Bethany beside the Jordan.

I was shocked to learn that sunset was 4:54 pm.

So the day was coming to a close, four o'clockⁱ or the tenth hour.

John wants us to note this detail.

It is the time of day when the Roman soldier got off duty.

Every evening in worship, a lamb would be sacrificed.

John says, you want to worship God. Here is the Lamb of God
And these men go with Jesus, wherever he was lodging.

In an age before electricity, most people would head home for the evening.
Maybe you hear Genesis 1, "And it was evening and morning, the first day."
And for these disciples it is a brand-new day- a new start, a beginning.
"What are you looking for?" Jesus asks.
A fresh start, a better way of life- as God intends for all of Creation.
Maybe they are not sure, but what they get- Presence, a person, God in flesh.

We read on Christmas, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."

God is present with us in a way, like never before in Jesus.
Maybe we understand God's Presence best when we experience absence.
We bring our questions and our longings to God.
The immortal, invisible, God only wise, who was hid from our eyes, becomes real.

We have waited patiently, like the Psalmist.
And eventually, we are able to say with him, "God heard my cry."
We will be able to give witness, to testify like John.
Hindsight is insight.
The Psalms are full of testimony to the disorienting questions of faith.
Eventually there is a revelation.

We can see what we came looking for. And the WHAT becomes WHO we are looking for." God's presence.

Come and see is Jesus' invitation. Come with me as I have come for you.

What are YOU looking for?

It is in the absence that we find God's presence sometimes.
We are changed.
Our disorientation leads to a re-orientation, a deeper faith, a more life-giving path.
Stay with Jesus.
Sticking with Jesus will ultimately change your life,
 maybe not in that first moment, but eventually.
Sometimes a personal crisis leads us to God.
And a new experience can lead to a life transformed.
A life transformed becomes communities transformed.
You never know what might happen when you follow Jesus, when you stay with him.

Millard Fuller was a wealthy businessman,

but his life was hollow and his marriage was falling apart.

A friend advised him to visit a rumored saint in rural Georgia, Clarence Jordan, (spelled like the river, but pronounced "Jirdon")

Jordan wrote the Cotton Patch gospels as a way to communicate the gospel to rural, racially segregated Georgia.

Something was happening...

Black and white people began to worship and work together, creating a new kind of Christian community called Koinonia Farm.

Koinonia is the biblical word for community, fellowship.

Millard Fuller came for lunch, and stayed a month, and really for the rest of his life.

In the 1950's and 60's in a Jim Crow South, Jordan himself stayed where Jesus was when the KKK tried to run him off his Koinonia farm!

Staying with Jesus will change your life.

Millard Fuller, stayed with Jordan, just like those disciples were present with Jesus.

Millard Fuller, you may know, founded a world-wide movement called Habitat for Humanity.

And through Habitat for Humanity thousands of families have found shelter, community, and the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Staying with Jesus can have impact.

Being followers of Jesus involves us in God's long-term Restoration Project.

Staying with Jesus is about becoming a part of a new way of relating to one another- a new community of Beloveds.

As we remembered last week at Matthew's telling of the Baptism of Jesus,

"This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased."

All who are washed in that love, are called to a new way of living.

We are given a name, Beloved, and called to help others realize that truth, too.

And a new community is realized.

We become the Presence of Jesus to one another.

This *Beloved Community* is another way of saying, the Kingdom of God.

For Martin Luther King, the human community meeting the basic needs of every person is a way to practice our faith.

Comprehensive healthcare, safe streets, affordable housing, nutritious food, strong schools, access to jobs, and meaningful employment are necessary for the *beloved community*.

God prompts us to remake our hostility-filled communities into those where justice and love reign true.

Disciples saved by grace are called to serve.
 Jesus Christ transforms individuals and society.

And that new beginning, that fresh start, began with an invitation, "Come and see."
 When Andrew and his friend ask Jesus where he is saying, Jesus doesn't offer them an address.
 He says, "Come and see."

The One who comes for us, invites us to come with him.

We start by walking with Jesus, staying with him,
 maybe even going places we never imagined going.
 Even when we do not know exactly what we are looking for, remain with Jesus.
 And like the Psalmist, we will know God's steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness.

We can tell about it and bring others with us.

ⁱ for it was about the tenth hour;

which, according to the Roman way of reckoning, must be ten o'clock in the morning; so that there was a considerable part of the day before them; but according to the Jewish way of reckoning, who reckon twelve hours to a day, it must be four o'clock in the afternoon, when there were but two hours to night: and this being; about the time when the lamb of the daily sacrifice of the evening was offered up, very seasonably did John point unto them, at this time, Christ the Lamb of God, the antitype of that sacrifice; for the daily evening sacrifice was slain at eight and a half, and was offered at nine and a half, or between the ninth and tenth hours of the day. The Ethiopic version renders it, "they remained with him that day unto the tenth hour" biblestudytools.com on John 1:39