

Message: "Evidences of Grace" - 1-15-23

Scripture Lesson: John 1:29-42

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ³¹I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³²And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³I 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.' ³⁴And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." ³⁵The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸When 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?" ³⁹He 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. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He 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).

Are you familiar with the saying that goes "just when you think you have seen it all....."

I was recently driving around town on errands of various sorts, when I saw a bumper sticker I had never seen before. It said, "Jesus is my airbag."

I was stunned. To be honest, I gave that bumper sticker much more thought than it deserved, but that's what happens when you have an overactive mind like mine. I still am not exactly sure what to think.

"Jesus is my airbag." Now what did that person mean by that message?

That Jesus is an explosive cushion apparatus embedded in a steering wheel console that activates upon severe impact?

That Jesus would protect the driver from all unexpected calamities?

That Jesus would save the driver from all the other idiots on the road?

Is this physical protection only, or perhaps a metaphor of sorts for spiritual, or emotional, or mental protection?

It reminds me of many other ways in which people express their understanding of Jesus which, shall we say, are not very deep.

Take other bumper stickers for instance. I've seen bumper stickers that say "Jesus is my co-pilot," or "No Jesus, No Peace; Know Jesus, Know Peace," or "Powered by Jesus," or "I bet Jesus uses his turn signals," or "Do you follow Jesus this closely?" or my favorite, "Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite." (there is a member of our congregation who will remain unnamed who has this bumper sticker on the back of her car!). Cute, interesting, and funny, but not very deep.

But then, there are other understandings of who Jesus is that are perhaps more disturbing. During Covid, it was not uncommon to see someone with a sign protesting mandates and health protocols holding a sign saying "Jesus is my vaccine." I've seen a sign stating that "Jesus is my home boy," which carries with it a likely reference to gang life. A popular message is "Jesus is my best friend," and there are many like this - Jesus is my lifeline; Jesus is my anchor; Jesus is my hero. One of my favorite adorns a T-shirt, saying "Jesus is my lift ticket;" but there is one message, one statement that would seem to cut to the chase, and perhaps outlines one of the greatest contrasts to the real Jesus - The message that says "my Jesus."

There is a popular song out there by Breakout Christian Country music artist Anne Wilson that goes by the title "My Jesus." It charts high on the music ratings for it carries a very heart-warming message about all the things Jesus will do for you; here's some of the lyrics:

He makes a way where there ain't no way
Rises up from an empty grave
Ain't no sinner that He can't save
Let me tell you 'bout my Jesus
His love is strong and His grace is free
And the good news is I know that He
Can do for you what He's done for me

Let me tell you 'bout my Jesus
And let my Jesus change your life.

I might as well tell you right now, I am negatively biased against this song. For one, try as I might, I have never gotten into country music; I think my DNA is missing the country gene. But more importantly, I struggle greatly with a one-dimensional theological understanding of Jesus, which seems to dominate Christianity. And what is that one-dimensional theological understanding of Jesus? WHAT JESUS CAN DO FOR YOU.

Well and good; this is indeed a part of our faith understanding, what Jesus can do for us. But I think you can see the problem here - for faith is not just about what Jesus can do for us, but what Jesus asks us to do for him. Or more to the point, who Jesus asks us to be for him. Or, going even further, how Jesus invites us to be with him, in terms of following his lead for life.

This is very clear to see in our passage from John, where John the Baptist and the disciples are all making statements about how Jesus is the lamb of God, about how he is the messiah come to save the world, the anointed one within whom the Spirit of God dwells; in other words, kind of like "Jesus is my airbag." But Jesus makes no confirmation of this by his words, no claim to such titles himself in response. No, in addressing the anxious hearts around him, his response is twofold: he asks them "What are you looking for?" and then he invites them to "Come and see" where he is staying. Perhaps I am making much of something quite ordinary, but I don't think so, especially when recalling the other areas of the gospel narratives where Jesus has a similar pattern of interaction with those who sense in him something of the divine. "What are you looking for?" is a regular question he has for many, from the syro-phoenician woman to the Pharisee Nicodemus to the lepers calling out his name to Mary and Martha as they lament their brother's death to the contest of wills with Pilate and Herod - in one form or another he is always asking those he encounters "What are you looking for?" - as if it is a primary question of faith let alone life, which indeed it is. The invitation is clear - to question life as if it had an answer.

But then, the gospel narratives carry another similar pattern with Jesus in his interaction with those who are hungry for hope - "Come and see." Follow me. Look

towards God. Trust in what lies beyond knowledge. Open yourself to possibility. Consider that God is already among you. Open your heart as well as your eyes. Consider the reversals that God proposes. Follow me.

We must always be on guard against the temptation to make our relationship with Jesus a one-way affair - that our relationship with Jesus is mostly about his responsiveness to us. Forgiveness, comfort, peace, love, patience, understanding, mercy, justice, direction, guidance.....we think of Jesus as the provider of these qualities that make life whole and steady. But Jesus came to the world to show us how these things are qualities of mutuality, as much to be received from God as shared by ourselves with others on God's behalf. What Jesus provides for us is only one part of God's presence on earth; the other part is how we share ourselves with God. And it takes both parts to create a life that knows Jesus.