

Message: "Transforming Preconceptions"

Scripture: 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).

Have you ever had a question get stuck in your mind? I've had one particular question stuck in my mind for a long time - and before you think it's some profoundly theologically-deep, pastor-type of question, no, it's nothing like that. Like most people who live here, I drive around town regularly; and in my travels I find myself fairly regularly passing by certain structures around town. Perhaps it's because of my civil engineering background, but I take particular notice of architecture that stands out from the norm. One such structure which has always caught my eye is Franklin Elementary School in the neighborhood between Russel and Reserve Streets. I'm not sure why it is architecturally so interesting to me; maybe it's the modernist design or the cubicle arrangements, or maybe it's the innovative painting scheme, or possibly the eye-catching offset angle with respect to surrounding roadways - whatever the reason, I find that building architecturally interesting.

Yet, in the 14 years we've lived in Missoula, I've driven past that school probably hundreds of times and never gone inside; and every time I drive by that school, I would ask myself the same question: "What does it look like inside?" I conjured up general visions from the elementary school I attended in Colorado just a few years ago (that is, around fifty years ago!); I thought of mile-long hallways and prison-styled classrooms and sixteen-foot foldable dining tables designed to be uncomfortable and the principal's office looking forbidding like a

police interview room where juvenile delinquents were grilled (not that I ever went to the principal's office, mind you!)...you know, a typical elementary school interior. "What does it look like inside?" It's not an important question, not one I felt particularly driven to answer - until my granddaughter started attending there - and had a Christmas concert there - and asked all her grandparents to attend. I realized I was going to have my question answered! And boy, did the answer surprise me - what I had envisioned before entering that school to watch our granddaughter sing was blown out of the water. Entering immediately into a large open space, children were having lunch at round tables with incorporated stools; office space was on either side of the entryway, very open with lots of window space; straight across the dining area was the gym where the concert was to be held, in the center of the building; walls were bright, kids were everywhere, all was moving efficiently; there was a very good feeling in the air. I discovered quickly that my preconceptions were way off track.

That experience came to mind when I was reading the scripture lesson for today, for John the Baptist and his followers had obviously been asking the same kind of question for a long time - but not about building interiors. They were searching for God, with certain questions getting stuck in their minds. "What does God look like?" "When is the savior coming?" "How do we live faithful lives?" "Where do we find God?" They had questions of curiosity stuck in their minds, curiosity about God and prophecy and revelation and truth and meaning and how it all resonates with the human condition. They had their best guesses from the major and minor prophets, from the patriarchs and matriarchs of old, from the eloquence of the Psalter to the anguish of Lamentations. These preconceptions led up to a general understanding that a messiah was coming who would conquer the enemies of Israel, establish the Jewish people as a, if not the, dominant political force in the world, and usher in a King David-style supremacy of God's privileged people who finally take their place as the favored of all nations. "What would the messiah be like?" was the question of the Jewish people before Jesus arrived; and when that question was answered by God showing up, their preconceptions of the Messiah were turned completely on their head.

A simple expression of this dynamic is this: If you are going to ask a question of understanding, namely what something is, it can be very helpful to first ask the question of preconsiderations, namely, "what is it you are actually looking for?" Asking what something is often gets bogged down by previous experiences and expectations and comparisons that try to fill the gaps in

knowledge; asking what one is looking for brings those preconsiderations to light for scrutiny and assessment. When a person reviews what is being searched for it's natural to ask why the search is being done at all; "What are you looking for?" is very close to "What do you want?" and "What do you need?" Such questions are much more grounded in real life, for what shapes our curiosity more than our desires and our needs? How we understand our wants and our needs largely shapes our pursuit of them in life.

Back to my experience with Franklin School - I started with the question "What does it look like inside?" But I found answers to my question when my question changed to "What are you looking for inside?" or more accurately, "Who are you looking for inside?" I find grandchildren are great motivators for discovering answers to many questions life raises, least of which are the interiors of schools - for the basic change in the question is the degree of significance of what one is trying to find out; in other words, what we look for takes on very different significance when we first make sure what we're looking for is worth finding. And looking for my granddaughter is much more significant than seeing what the inside of a building is like.

One of my favorite modern-day parables concerns a gas station on the edge of a large city. (and, yes, I've shared this before!). A car drives up to get gas; while the tank was being filled, the attendant asked a casual question of the driver. "So, are you here on business or pleasure?" The driver says, "Actually, I'm considering a new job being offered in this town and moving my family here; say, could you tell me, what kind of people live here?" The attendant looks at the driver and asks, "Well, what kind of people live where you are now?" The driver says, "Oh, people are mean and cold and don't get along very well; no one cares about anything but themselves." The attendant looks at the driver and says, "Well, I'm sad to say you pretty much have the same kind of people here." The driver then drives off. An hour later another car heading into town drives up for gas; the attendant starts both the pump and the conversation as before, and asks, "So, are you here on business or pleasure?" The driver says, "Actually, I'm here for an interview, and I'm thinking about moving my family here if I get the job. Tell me, what are the people like here?" The attendant says to him, "Well, what are the people like where you come from?" The driver says, "Oh, they are such wonderful people, always caring for each other and kindly and helpful; they're great to be around." The attendant looks at the driver and says, "Well, I'm glad to say you pretty much have the same kind of people here."

How we see things often influences what we see. And what we look for often determines how we look for it. These are important considerations brought to light in the interaction between Jesus and the disciples of John, who expressed their interest in Jesus by following him around. You can almost see that they want to ask him "Who are you?" or "Are you the messiah?" or "What are you going to do?" but they remain silent in their curiosity. That's when Jesus asks that question that ties all their curiosities together - "What are you looking for?" I imagine them being caught a little off guard by this question, for it throws the thinking back into their arena - they probably weren't thinking about what they were really looking for, only wanting a positive ID of this figure as God's chosen. But, what was it they were really looking for, beyond some sense of confirmation? Were they looking for hope in desperate land, were they looking for truth in a deceptive world, were they looking for guidance in a disorienting reality? Such internal questions make one more receptive to possible answers, I believe, for they center us in our need for outside information and external support; such questions hit at our common understanding of our frailty and insufficiency in and of ourselves to make hopeful headway in this world. We need others; we need God; such questions awaken this awareness in the heart and mind; such questions make us more aware of, and receptive to, God's gift of grace.

You would think Jesus would begin his journey with these curious disciples with an orientation of deep theological explanations, extensive Bible studies (the Old Testament at least), and a seminary class in preaching 101 all designed to directly answer their discipleship questions. Jesus does no such thing; instead, Jesus meets their curiosity in a much more effective way by inviting them to live into that question "What are you looking for?" He says to them, "Come and see." Yes, I know the particular question was about which Motel Jesus was staying at, but Jesus was moving from the particular to the general and onto the universal with that interchange, essentially saying to all of their questions of him, of God, of humanity, of hope and forgiveness and truth and justice and all the aspects of the divine - to all of their questions, he said "Come and see," or later in scripture, "Follow me."

We might say it in different ways today, but what Jesus was getting at was moving from thought to action, moving from idea to application, moving from opinion to its testing, moving from belief to life; we might say "Get involved" or "Be the change" or "move thought into experience" or "see for yourself" or "Dive in." "Come and see" is the original invitation Jesus gives not only to his disciples,

but to all who seek truth, who seek the fullness of life, who seek a better world. "Come and see" is the invitation to engage life in the questions that matter; "Come and see" is the invitation to join Jesus as our guide. "Come and see" is his invitation to "Follow me." Ask all the questions you like; the only answers that really matter will be those that directly affect life, yours, mine, and all the rest.

Which brings us to a closing point that is extremely relevant for today's world, something which Jesus speaks to simply but powerfully. We are, these days, experiencing tremendous pressure to believe certain things that are certifiably untrue, to interpret what we see with our eyes or hear with our ears in accordance with a political perspective or subjective interpretation rather than trusting our own vision or experiences. "Just accept that what I say is true" is a phrase spoken constantly by global leaders and prominent figures seeking to reinforce certain narratives; many in fact have become so acclimated to party ideology that they can no longer see anyone with honest scrutiny or discernment; call it party allegiance, or embraced ignorance, or blind loyalty, or cult-styled brainwashing, or even wishful thinking, there are many, many people who support what, in other times, they would instantly condemn, such is the blindness of this age. I meet them, I know them, often very good people who somehow tolerate horribly bad things, good hearts who somehow find it expedient to hate or judge or condemn, good lives whose indifference allows evil to fester and grow into the horrors we see today.

That's where the counsel of Jesus is so very important not only to people of faith, but anyone who thinks the truth matters. "Come and see;" put reality to the test of experience, which makes reality valid; do not trust in words automatically, especially the words of those who practice deception and intentional distortion; they have already demonstrated the falseness of their world and their perspective.

"Come and see." See for yourself. Experience for yourself. If the proof is in the put-in, by all means, put in! Test what is said to be true; employ what is said to work well; apply what is said to be worthy of life. Do these things as any rational human being ought to do; but also do these things as any person of faith in God ought to do. Do not only believe something; put that belief into life, come and see how it works for life; discover what it means to life. We must always remember that our faith means nothing as thought alone; our faith means everything as it gives shape to our living.