

COME AND SEE

Sermon, January 14, 2018

Texts: John 1:35-51; I Corinthians 6:12-20

As you may know, the spiritual we just sang (*"We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder"*) was inspired by the Old Testament story of Jacob's dream of a *ladder*, or a staircase; a point of contact between earth and heaven; with apologies to Led Zeppelin, this was the original Stairway to Heaven. In this dream Jacob saw angels continually coming down and going back up this staircase, this bridge between the two worlds. There is no other mention of this dream in all the Old Testament; it is not mentioned again until centuries later, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says to Nathanael, *"I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."* Slightly paraphrased, Jesus is saying (*intimating words and themes found later in John's gospel*), *"Nathanael, you are a true Israelite, you know of your patriarch Jacob's dream. In Me, you see the incarnation of Jacob's dream. I AM the link between heaven and earth. No one comes to the Father but by Me."* Jesus Christ is the ladder, the stairway, the bridge, the "point of connection" between heaven and earth. All interaction between earth and heaven is by and through Him. So, in this short little verse in John 1:51, Jesus is claiming to be the fulfillment of Jacob's dream; He is the bridge between heaven and earth.

John puts this encounter at the end of the very first chapter. John uses literary license to create his persuasive evangelical account of the Gospel; his whole style is radically different from Matthew's, Mark's or Luke's. He is writing thematically, and he is writing factually, but he is not necessarily writing chronologically. For John, it is not so important when Jesus did or said something as it is THAT Jesus did or say it. He begins his Gospel with this grand, sweeping, majestic introduction that goes back before the beginning of time itself introducing this Word that was with God and was God, through Whom all things were made, this Word that became flesh, and then the very first words John has the Word speaking are a question! The very first words of Jesus in this Gospel are a question, John 1:38 -- *"What do you seek?"* (the NIV has it *"What do you want?"*, but the KJV and RSV more precisely translate it as *"What do you seek?"*) Now, John is not a writer who wastes words on "small talk." Jesus is asking this question in a more philosophical and/or existential manner, as if to say, *"What is it you are looking for? What is it that you want in life? What do you seek?"* And maybe I'm reading too much into their response, but I think the disciples reply, in so many words, *"This answer will take longer than a few moments. Where are you staying? Can we come over and talk?"* The next words out of Jesus' mouth are, *"Come and See."* They went with Him, and spent a day with Him ... and that day changed everything for them. Thus, John sets the stage for his persuasive, evangelical account of Jesus' life.

I'm reminded of the popular Moody Blues song of the late sixties, **"The Question"** – with lyrics such as *"Why do we never get an answer, When we're knocking at the door, with a thousand million questions, About hate and death and war? -- I'm looking for someone to change my life, I'm looking for a miracle in my life!"* Well, John has Jesus leading off the "concert" of this Gospel with "THE Question" *"What do you seek?"* And then Jesus' invitation, *"Come and See."* In effect, intimating, *"Come to a place where Jesus dwells, come have an encounter with Jesus, come and meet with Jesus to find what you really seek. And the rest of my Gospel is all about this Word."* Now, hold that thought.

(I know I refer often to various bands from the sixties and seventies who, to those here younger than me, may be largely unknown and/or something out of some ancient, bygone era, but hey, the Moody Blues are playing near Clearwater, Florida today on their Fiftieth Anniversary tour! They roll right out there on stage in their wheelchairs and keep on performing! Their first album, "Days of Future Passed," after which this anniversary tour is named, was released in 1967 ... singles including "Go Now", "Nights in White Satin", "Tuesday Afternoon", and "The Question". They have sold 70 million albums worldwide and will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2018. Sadly, one of the original members, Ray Thomas, who had left the band in 1999, did pass away just ten days ago.)

Back to "Jacob's Ladder." Note just *who* is seen ascending and descending this stairway to heaven in the Bible. Angels. So why does the spiritual say *"We are climbing Jacob's ladder?"* We aren't angels ... or, are we? Augustine wrote, *"Angels are spirits, but it is not because they are spirits that they are angels. They become angels when they are sent [by God], for the name 'angel' refers to their office, not their nature."* Strictly speaking, the word "Angel" describes a position of office, rather than a state of being. In short, "Angel" is a job title. The root word for 'angel' in the Hebrew can be translated to mean *"to dispatch as a deputy;"* and the root word for angel in the Greek means *"to send."* In the Greek language an "aggelos" was a messenger, one who is sent. Angels, biblically speaking, are God's messengers, His emissaries, His deputies, and, at times, His soldiers. The Bible uses the term 'angel' for God's invisible, spiritual, heavenly messengers as well as His earthbound, human ones. In fact, something often missed in our English translations is that in the Old Testament Hebrew, the words "prophet" and "angel" are often used interchangeably. Biblically speaking, an angel is simply one who fulfills the angelic job description. There are heavenly spiritual angels, and there are earthbound human angels. God uses both. Whoever acts as God's emissary, God's messenger, God's deputy, God's soldier is fulfilling the office and job description of Angel.

So, *"We are climbing Jacob's ladder,"* these faithful slaves appropriately sang, *"... soldiers of the Cross."* Think of the angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder as good soldiers who are going up to receive orders from the Top, then coming down and going out into this world to faithfully execute the orders received. Many slaves of faith

found comfort in their difficulties by remembering who they were, who they were called to be, and what they were called to do both in, and in spite of, their earthly circumstances. No matter what the circumstances, we too, have the angelic calling to be soldiers of the cross ... dutifully executing the orders of the Lord of Hosts as best we can. As Paul admonishes in our Epistle reading, we are not our own, we are bought with a price; we are God's messengers, God's emissaries, God's deputies and representatives in all we do. And as we live accordingly, we are fulfilling our calling as angels, and we are in the company of angels!

I like the story about an English teacher who allowed her car to roll through a stop sign, and was immediately pulled over by a young police officer. The officer turned out to be a former student of hers who immediately recognized her. He couldn't resist saying, *"Mrs. Smith, a stop sign is meant to be a period, not a comma!"* It's a full stop, Mrs. Smith. Of all people, you should remember your grammar. Well, I think Paul is giving something of a grammar lesson in the Epistle reading for today. He is saying to the Corinthians, *"Don't put a question mark where God has put a period!"* If we are going to fulfill our angelic calling, if we are going to be God's emissaries, deputies, we need to respect the full stops, the stop signs in the Bible. Our bodies are the temple of God, and we are to honor God with how we use our bodies, and especially so in the area of sexuality. That's our angelic calling. We are not on our own to call our own shots in areas of morality; there are high, clear and pure directives given by God to His representatives, His emissaries, His angels. And that is who we are called to be.

Back to our Gospel reading. Jesus walks by John the Baptist, and John declares to his followers, *"Behold, the Lamb of God!"* John directs people to Jesus; that is his role, his calling, his divinely appointed duty, that's his angelic assignment. The result is that two of his own disciples go on to follow Jesus. One of those two is Andrew, who after that life changing day he spent with Jesus, immediately goes home to get his brother Simon, and then brings him to Jesus. Jesus then gives Simon the name "Peter." When we've looked at this passage in years past, I asked you two questions: (1) *Who was the Andrew in your life, and* (2) *Whose Andrew are you?* I asked you to take a moment to reflect on that, and to do so with appreciation. Who was the Andrew in your life? Who was that angel who brought you to a place where you could meet Jesus? Maybe it was one or both of your parents; maybe it was a friend. Maybe it was a sibling, a grandparent, an uncle, an aunt. Maybe it was a Sunday School teacher, a youth leader, maybe it was some celebrity or author who publicly displayed his/her faith. Maybe it was a combination of any of these; I know I can name many faithful Andrews in my life. Who was your Andrew? And the second question: Whose Andrew are you? I hope you all can enjoy the immense satisfaction of knowing that someone is in some church worshipping today, perhaps even in this church this morning, because you have been a faithful angel and have played the role of Andrew in their lives.

We are told that the next day Jesus then calls Philip, who in turn goes to find Nathanael, saying *"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the prophets also wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."* Nathanael's response was to wonder, *"How in the world can anybody good come out of Nazareth?"* Nazareth was something of a depressed backwater town in the hills. Notice Philip does not argue, nor does he trivialize Nathanael's reservations. He simply issues that same invitation Jesus gave earlier. He says *"Come and see."* "Come to the place where you can meet Jesus." Studies have shown that some 80% of people who come to a new or renewed faith in Jesus and do so because someone invited them to *"Come and see."* Perhaps the person inviting them didn't know a lot about the Bible, nor could they explain the doctrine of the Trinity, but they simply said, *"Come and see. Come and hear our choir. Come join us at circle or at 39ers or at youth fellowship or at the luncheon. Come and enjoy a friendly bunch of people. Come and see!"* In short, invite people to **a place where they may meet Jesus**, Who promises to be present whenever two or three are gathered in His name. And that's something every one of us can do. But to clarify: The invitation ultimately is not just an invitation to come and see our choir, or listen to the pastor, or to come meet a wonderful group of people, or be relieved of your kids for an hour or two. It may be all these things and more, but the ultimate invitation, is to come and see Jesus, Who is always present where His people are gathered, and Who is the reason for and the focus of just about all we do around here.

I simply do not believe people are not interested in matters of faith today; there are many who are just waiting for someone to invite them to "Come and See." This does not mean you have to be perfect (*good luck with that*), nor does it mean the church has to be perfect (*and good luck with that!*). The One we worship is perfect, not us. People are not looking for perfection today, so much as they are seeking hope, they are seeking authenticity, they are looking for community, AND people are seeking for a genuine sense of God's presence and reality. They really are.

Philip risks the invitation, and Nathanael comes to see for himself. He comes to the place where Jesus may be encountered. And notice what happens: Jesus sees them coming, and it is Jesus who speaks to Nathanael's doubt, it is Jesus Who causes Nathanael's skepticism to fall away.

Whether you think so or not, people listen to you, they respect what you have to say, and they develop a trust in who you are and what you represent. Be an angel, and use your influence and presence in their lives to call attention to Jesus ... through your deeds, through your words, through your kind invitations. Invite them to **"Come and see."** And trust Jesus to do any convincing!