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1/19/20--University Presbyterian Church
John 1:29-42

THE INVITATION

There is an odd detail in our text today from John's Gospel. And whenever the Bible contains an unusual detail, that is usually an invitation to ask questions and do some exploring. Did you happen to hear that unusual detail in today's passage? John the Baptist sees Jesus passing by and he identifies Jesus as "the Lamb of God." And then, after hearing this, two of John's disciples begin to follow Jesus. Jesus turns around and sees these two guys following him and he asks them a question: "What are you looking for?" The two guys don't really answer his question, but instead they in turn ask Jesus a question: "Where are you staying?" And Jesus says to them, "Come and see." And they go with Jesus. And then we come to this strange detail, when the writer of this gospel tells us, "It was about four o'clock in the afternoon." What a strange detail. Why would it matter that it's four o'clock in the afternoon?

Truthfully, I don't know for sure why this unusual detail is part of the story. I can't find any solid answers in the commentaries on this passage. But I wonder if it might help us if we pondered what we are typically doing and what is often taking place at four o'clock in the afternoon. Four o'clock is late afternoon. Our day is winding down. We are likely tired by four in the afternoon, and thinking about heading home, and getting dinner. Moreover, this time of year it's beginning to get dark by four o'clock. Shadows lengthen and dusk starts to settle in. Think about the time when Jesus lived--a time without electricity. When darkness descends there are no street lamps to light up the city streets. So, four o'clock, when the light is fading and the day is waning, is a time of day to begin heading for home before things get *really* dark.

Except for here in our story. When John the Baptist makes his revelation about Jesus being the Lamb of God, an unexpected light comes on in the hearts and minds of those two disciples of John and they are inspired to follow Jesus. Maybe you will remember how just a few verses earlier in the Gospel of John in his beautiful prologue, the writer of this gospel identifies Jesus as "the light that shines in the darkness." So notice how in today's story that point is driven home: just as dusk is settling upon the land at four o'clock, Jesus becomes that light shining in the darkness. The two men are attracted to that light and they follow after Jesus.

I think it's interesting that when Jesus notices that they are following him, he asks, "What are you looking for?" They answer his question with a question of their own. And it's kind of a strange question: "Teacher, where are you staying?" It almost sounds like they were asking Jesus for his address. But what this question gets at is something we all want to know: where can we find Jesus? Where is Jesus to be found? Where can we find that light to light up our darkness?

And then Jesus responds in a beautiful way. He extends an invitation: "Come and see." Come and see for yourselves where you can find the light in the darkness. To these two men who want to follow Jesus, and to us sitting here all these centuries later who want to follow him, Jesus offers an invitation. Come and see. So often we think of religion as a set of rules or beliefs we are supposed to follow. Do this. Don't do this. But notice that Jesus doesn't give these two men a lecture about what they must do to follow him. Instead, he issues an invitation: Come and see. He simply invites them to join him on a journey. Come and see where the light of God can be found.

And in the upcoming days and weeks that they walk with Jesus, they *will* see. Jesus uses every situation they encounter as a teaching moment for where the light of God can be seen.

They see how the hungry are fed, both in body and in spirit. They see how the sick and disabled--people society excluded--are first noticed by Jesus and then healed by Jesus. They see when a guilty woman caught in adultery is forgiven. They see despised people like Samaritans and excluded people like women are included. They see how dead people are raised and hopeless people are given hope. They see their teacher humble himself by washing *their* feet. And they see where God's light is found and what that light looks like.

For Jesus faith is not about sitting in church pews one hour a week. Rather, Jesus invites us to undertake an *experience* of a lifetime with him. Come and see, he says to us. Come and see God. Come and see God when forgiveness is extended. Come and see God when compassion is offered. Come and see God when justice is carried out. Come and see God when outcasts are included. And once we see, we can then join in.

These are dark times in our nation and in our world. Divisions within our country are profound. Anxiety about world peace and the future of our democracy run high. There is the urgent concern about the planet's health and the fear inspired by so little being done to change the world's habits and behaviors. It may seem to many of us as if it is four o'clock in the afternoon and we anxiously await the descent of greater darkness. As the shadows lengthen over us and our world, we may wonder where hope can be found.

John the Baptist helps us see where hope is found when he sees Jesus walking by and declares: "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" Notice that John does not declare, "Look, here is the Lion of God," or "Here is the Wolf of God," or some other kind of metaphor of awesome might and ferocity. And he doesn't say, "Look, here is the Peacock of God," a metaphor that would indicate one who was showy and prominent and easy to spot. In fact, the feeling we get is that Jesus was kind of unnoticeable. John the Baptist twice states that he himself didn't know who

Jesus was at first. We are left with the feeling that Jesus was no red carpet celebrity, someone who was easily recognized for who he was. Instead, John tells us that Jesus is the "Lamb of God." A lamb. A lamb who is gentle. A lamb who is vulnerable. A lamb who is not prominent and whose power is not evident. But in order to understand the power that resides in the Lamb, we must accept the invitation to "come and see." Because in that vulnerable but tenacious love, is the power to heal and to transform.

Tomorrow our nation celebrates the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We know him as an advocate and leader for civil rights, but he was also a pastor and a Christian of profound faith. And one of the things we celebrate in his life was his efforts to show us the light of God. King not only highlighted the darkness of racism and inequality, but as a person of faith he believed in the power of God's light to heal and transform. And so he called us to love our enemies. And he stood resolutely for non-violence. And he saw how racism wounded not only African Americans but white Americans and our entire society. And he worked for justice believing in God's power to transform. He was not a perfect human being--none of us is. But he sought to follow the One who brings light to our darkness. And through him, we could see the light of God, offering hope, bringing healing, and showing us how to be more fully who God created us to be.

Jesus' late afternoon invitation is extended to all of us to "come and see" where he can be found, and then, even while the shadows may be falling around us, to walk into the darkness after the light of the world.