

Come and See

(Psalm 40:1-11); John 1:29-42

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church in Camden, UCC; January 26, 2020

When a couple first brought their newborn baby home, their four-year old child asked for time alone with his new baby sibling. The parents were a bit surprised and uncertain of what their older child wanted. So, they stayed just outside the door of the nursery. It sounded like the older son climbed into the crib with the baby. Then they heard him say: “Quick, tell me. Who made you? Where did you come from? I am beginning to forget!” This little anecdote is a potent reminder of all our searching. There is something of God in us always seeking reconnection to our original ground of belonging. The older we get, the more our perception can get crowded with concepts, ideas, hurtful experiences, and judgments – collectively and individually. All these can crowd out a more foundational truth about who and whose we are and what our purpose is.

This existential longing also drives some of John the Baptist’s disciples to find out more about Jesus in our Gospel story for today. In John’s Gospel, the Baptist has the primary role of pointing others to Christ. When John the Baptist sees Jesus, he calls him the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)” and testifies that Jesus was blessed with the abiding Holy Spirit.¹ We do not find the title “Lamb of God” used in the other Gospels² but the image of the lamb probably refers to Exodus 12:21, 46 and Isaiah 53:7. Exodus tells the story of liberation from slavery in Egypt. The lamb was slaughtered and its blood used to mark the houses of the Israelites while death was passing through killing the Egyptian firstborn children. Homes marked with this innocent blood were spared. The Israelites then fled into freedom (slow grumbling process).³ However gruesome these images are to us now, the intention underneath them is to tell a story of liberation.

¹ The Gospel of John does not describe Jesus’ baptism directly but tells of it in this witness from John. This Gospel goes to great length to describe Jesus as the primary revelation and places John the Baptist, a popular figure of his time, in a secondary role. Note also that that this story does not share the assumption from the Gospel of Luke that John and Jesus were cousins.

² The lamb plays a role in the Hebrew Scriptures and the NT *Letter to the Hebrews* and *The Book of Revelation*.

³ Isaiah speaks of a suffering servant who takes on the suffering of the people and is later vindicated.

Notice that John does not say that the lamb takes away the sins of the world but the sin of the world. In the Gospel of John, sin refers to a collective brokenness which Jesus as the Christ has come to heal. The root sin is that we are living and acting as though we are isolated beings. Our actions are symptomatic of this existential pain. We live as though we are cut off from the vine, an image the Gospel of John features in 15:5ff. We have forgotten who made us and where we come from. Thankfully, the verb tense describing what the lamb does declares that the liberating and healing work is already under way and will continue. This is as true today as it was then. Jesus does sacrifice his life as he loves people who are struggling and even those who reject him and don't understand their own struggles. You have heard me say many times that I don't read this sacrifice in terms of a substitutionary payment required by God. The words from the Psalmist for today remind us of this: "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear" (Ps 40:6). God is asking us to pay attention, listen and act upon how God calls us to be present in the real suffering and beauty of our world. We encounter this invitation in our Gospel story.

Some of John the Baptist's disciples seek Jesus out. Jesus asks them in Rabbinic fashion to let their answers emerge from within, "What are you looking for?" In other words, do they and do we know what lies at the root of our longing? They ask the curious question, "Where do you live?" He responds by inviting them to "come and see." This beautifully humanizes the encounter. He only invites and they need to take the initiative to come and experience who is. Perhaps they hope that seeing where and how he lives will help them connect with him. This has an element of anchoring us in a real time and place as is true of all our lives.

What is home to him? Jesus was an itinerant preacher, dependent on the hospitality of others. Nothing is actually said about the place where he stayed but we know that these seekers wanted to stay with him. The word used to say that they stayed and remained with him is also used every time Jesus speaks of abiding in God's love. Could it not be that they are finding Jesus as the Christ to be their home, their connection to their original root, the vine on which they can thrive and bear fruit? In this sense, home transcends all time and place at the same time. In

Christ, God is completely available to us amidst the suffering and the liberation of our lives.⁴

The men who come to see him become students of Christ's path of transformation. It is a path of letting go of our clinging to any false and isolated sense of identity that pits us against each other, against God and actually ourselves. It is path of risking presence with and amidst all who are hurting until we can all rise together into a new and liberated life, here and now.

These disciples/students are so touched by being with Jesus that they go out and proclaim to others that they have encountered the great news of God's love in their own lives. They are echoing the Psalmist in their own time and place who wrote: "I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation (Ps. 40:10a)." They are saying "Here I am" in the midst of their own lives and community and proceed to invite others to the same path and community. They became a community committed to a life of loving service no matter what the cost.

We commemorated Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King this past week. He is one of our cloud of witnesses who said, "Here I am." King left us the legacy of a committed and transforming life while also being human with all that this entails. He became a "Lamb of God" as he marched with and inspired multitudes to refuse the lie of racism and to shine a light on its destructive and lasting legacy. He came and saw all the suffering first hand in the African-American community from Selma to Montgomery and the more quietly racist North. White supremacists have felt emboldened in recent times. Prison, poverty and health care statistics show us each day that African Americans are still overall disadvantaged. I believe these are still also testimonies to systemic and existential injustices. Our economic and educational systems play a role in their perpetuation. The work is far from done.

One of the many things I deeply appreciate about Martin Luther King is that he was willing to see the big picture. He spoke about needing to build the beloved community. In that community there would be no place of hatred and desire for destruction even for those who

⁴ Richard Rohr calls Christ the cosmic lure who brings us fully into touch with ourselves in our humanity blessed by divinity. Richard Rohr in *New Great Themes of Scripture*, chapter 10 (audiobook).

most vehemently opposed the civil rights movement.⁵ King always called for the integrity of belief and action with love at its core. He knew fully well the sacrifices this would take from getting assaulted to seeing churches burn and far beyond. He would say that freedom, liberation, never comes easy. Suffering is part of the journey but it leads to a promised land where such hurts can be transformed. King wisely developed relationships with people representing other ethnic and “racial” groups who were suffering and stood with them, prayed with them, spoke with and for them. He was prepared to die if proclaiming the evil of racism and affirming the dignity of every human being would require it of him. This also became evident as he became increasingly critical of the Vietnam War. He noted that the poor were disproportionately called to serve and that specific groups stood to profit. He also refused to separate the world into us vs. them. A hurting child in the USA mattered to him as much as a hurting child in Vietnam and vice versa.

I was reminded of this when I watched Kim Phuc Phan Ti ‘s “Brief but spectacular take on pain and forgiveness” during a recent episode of the PBS Newshour. Kim Phuc PhanTi tells the remarkable story of her journey through suffering into forgiving love and freedom.⁶ At age nine, she was severely burnt during a napalm attack of US forces during the Vietnam war. The date June 8, 1972, and the place is forever edged in her memory as the particular day of her life-changing experience. There is nothing abstract about her experience. Her suffering was caught on film and became one of the iconic images of the war. At a younger age, she felt terrible about having her pained (and naked due to the napalm burning her clothes off her body) image exposed in those famous photographs and videos.

⁵ I urge you to watch a video featuring King’s speech “Birth of a Nation” offered on April 7, 1957 in Montgomery, Alabama. <https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?fr=yhs-rotz-001&hsimp=yhs-001&hspart=rotz&p=martin+Luther+King+Beloved+Communitz#id=1&vid=7c8ddfd57e34e82e2b4421f8a9626a51&action=click>.

⁶ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/brief/>. Her “brief but spectacular” take on love and forgiveness aired on the PBS Newshour on January 16, 2020.

Since the incident, Kim Phuc Phan Ti has endured 17 surgeries and daily pain. Because of the scars, her skin cannot breathe, leaving her body heating up and adding to the pain. She also shared that she felt the inner heat of hatred, anger, resentment growing in her. She would ask, "Why me? Why did this happen to me." By the age of 19, she had grown so despondent that she did not want to live anymore. Then she came upon a copy of the New Testament in a library in Saigon and something about Jesus Christ's story of transforming pain and suffering into powerful love lured her and broke open her heart. She became baptized. She knew that her heart was opening and being transformed when she found herself praying for her perceived enemies. She prayed even for the pilot who dropped the napalm bomb that nearly ended her life. Gradually, she could feel the hatred fall away and transform into a deep and liberating love as she journeyed through the cross of her suffering to a resurrected life.

Kim Phuc Phan Ti eventually married and became a mother. When her own son was asking her about her scars, she shared about the pain of war. Her son gently touched her wounded skin and asked, "Does it hurt here?" When she nodded, he kissed her wound. Other children have spontaneously done the same with her. Now sharing her picture has become a tool to connect. Kim Phuc began to serve children who have been traumatized during war and helped build hospitals and schools in many places. She teaches the children the importance of sharing their pain so that it can be healed. Along the way, she has built deep relationships which are the context in which love is shared in abiding and sustaining ways. She says that her work is not driven primarily by duty or a sense of personal mission but by the dynamism of love alive in her by the grace of God. The good news of Christ and the witness of children have sustained and increased this love.

May we also go and see where Christ dwells right in the midst of our lives. He is our abiding home, calling us to build the beloved community together. May the Spirit empower us this day to say: "Here I am" ...I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation (Ps. 40:10a)." May our words translate into deeds rooted in the abiding love of God revealed in Christ. Amen.