

"Come and See"

An Invitation to Keep Growing in Our Relationship with the Lord

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith
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Readings

Psalms 116:1-14 (NKJV)

- 1 I love the LORD, because He has heard
My voice and my supplications.
- 2 Because He has inclined His ear to me,
Therefore I will call upon Him as long as I live.
- 3 The pains of death surrounded me,
And the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me;
I found trouble and sorrow.
- 4 Then I called upon the name of the LORD:
"O LORD, I implore You, deliver my soul!"
- 5 Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
Yes, our God is merciful.
- 6 The LORD preserves the simple;
I was brought low, and He saved me.
- 7 Return to your rest, O my soul,
For the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
- 8 For You have delivered my soul from death,
My eyes from tears,
And my feet from falling.
- 9 I will walk before the LORD
In the land of the living.
- 10 I believed, therefore I spoke,
"I am greatly afflicted."
- 11 I said in my haste,
"All men are liars."
- 12 What shall I render to the LORD
For all His benefits toward me?
- 13 I will take up the cup of salvation,
And call upon the name of the LORD.
- 14 I will pay my vows to the LORD
Now in the presence of all His people.

John 1:35-51 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

³⁵ Again, the next day, John stood, and two of his disciples. ³⁶ And looking at Jesus walking, he says, "See, the Lamb of God!"

³⁷ And the two disciples heard him speaking, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ And Jesus, turning and observing them following, says to them, "What do you seek?"

And they said to Him, "Rabbi" (which is to say, being translated, Teacher), "where are You staying?"

³⁹ He says to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where He stayed, and they stayed with Him that day, and it was about the tenth hour.

⁴⁰ One of the two who heard from John and followed Him was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter.

⁴¹ He first finds his own brother Simon and says to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is, being translated, the Christ).

⁴² And he led him to Jesus, and Jesus, looking at him, said, "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Kephas (which is, being translated, a Rock).

⁴³ The next day, Jesus willed to go out into Galilee, and He finds Philip, and says to him, "Follow Me." ⁴⁴ And Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip finds Nathanael and says to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets, Jesus, the son of Joseph, from Nazareth."

⁴⁶ And Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good be from Nazareth?" Philip says to him, "Come and see."

⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and says about him, "See, truly an Israelite in whom is no deceit."

⁴⁸ Nathanael says to Him, "From where do you know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."

⁴⁹ Nathanael answered and says to Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel!"

⁵⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you underneath the fig tree,' you believe? You shall see greater things than these. ⁵¹ And He says to him, "Amen, amen, I say to you, after this you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

True Christian Religion §11:1, 3

[K]nowledge about God and therefore acknowledgment of God is impossible without revelation.... Because revelation has been given, a person is able to meet God and receive influx, and so from being natural become spiritual.

Faith in God comes into a person on a pathway that comes down from above, from the soul into the higher reaches of the intellect. Knowledge of God comes into a person on a pathway that comes up from below, because the intellect takes it in from the revealed Word through the bodily senses. The two paths coming in meet in the midst of the intellect. There, natural faith, which is merely a strongly held opinion, becomes spiritual faith, that is to say, actual acknowledgment. The human intellect, then, is a kind of trading floor on which exchanges occur.

Introduction

- We're going to be talking today about how to grow in our relationship with the Lord and so, to begin, I'd invite you to think about your current understanding of who the Lord is.
 - What do you know about the Lord?
 - What is He like?
 - What does He care about?
 - What is your sense of who He is?
- The follow-up question to that is where did your understanding of who the Lord is come from?
 - It's likely a complex amalgamation of what you've heard from other people, what you've read for yourself in the Lord's Word, and your own personal experiences.
- Final question—and this is the hardest one: how much of your sense of who the Lord is a product of who the Lord really is and how much is it a product of who you are?
 - We human beings have a tendency to make God in our own image instead of allowing Him to make us in *His* image.
 - We carve or mold gods for ourselves that match our biases or our selfish tendencies instead of worshipping God as He really is.
 - That's just an uncomfortable question to keep in mind as we go through this sermon and I'd be interested to hear your thoughts afterward about it.

Outline

- As we reflect on these questions, we don't have to just think about them as abstract concepts: we get to watch the Master at work.
 - We get to watch the Lord working with some of His disciples at the very beginning of their journey with the Lord.
 - We'll start by looking at how repentance and historical faith can lay the groundwork for our faith in the Lord.
 - And then we'll spend some time reflecting on the Lord's invitation to "Come and see" and what it can teach us about how to work on our faith.

John the Baptist: Repentance and Historical Faith

The Importance of Repentance

- The first person in the story to recognize Jesus for who He really was, was John the Baptist.
- He had been sent to prepare the way of the Lord and he did so by telling people that they needed to repent.
- And the teachings of the New Church confirm that working on actually repenting is what really gets our spiritual lives going.

- *True Christian Religion* §510
 - As we go through the early stages of our lives, there are many things that prepare us for the church and introduce us into it; but acts of repentance are the things that actually produce the church within us.
- John the Baptist recognizes the Lord and points him out to other people.
 - John had been given a special sign of seeing the Spirit descending as a dove on Jesus so that he could recognize Jesus for who He really was.
 - After he saw the sign He testified that Jesus was the Son of God.
 - He also called Him by a name that seems to emphasize the Lord's role in the hard work of repentance.
 - He says, "See, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).
- The first time John says this, nobody seems to respond but the next day he says it to two of his disciples who are standing there and then they go follow Jesus.
 - Those disciples didn't experience the same sign that John did.
 - They were John's disciples and so we can assume that they had at least begun the process of trying to repent from their sins.
 - And they had John's testimony about Jesus and who He was.
 - But, if they were going to come to have faith in Jesus for themselves, they were going to need to go and investigate things for themselves.

The Importance and Limitations of Handed-Down Faith

- In this respect we can see John the Baptist as also representing historical faith or faith that is handed-down to us from someone else – both its importance and its limitations. (See *Apocalypse Explained* §815:9 for more on historical faith.).
 - It's really important that we have parents and other mentors and people we respect to point us towards the Lord – to tell us, "That Person is God; that Person can help you with your sins."
 - But it doesn't work to just take that on faith from some other person; we need to see the truth of that for ourselves.
 - And John knew that.
 - He wasn't looking to hold onto his disciples as his own personal followers – his goal was to have the Lord become more and more important to them and for him to be less and less important.
 - John says of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).
- Many of you probably had people who pointed you towards the Lord.
 - And many of you have probably been in the role of pointing other people towards the Lord.
 - Any parent has that role for their child.
 - And, if we have the privilege of being in that kind of role or encouraging another person in their faith in the Lord, we have to hold our role the way John the Baptist held his role.
 - Our role is to prepare the way of the Lord and then get out of the way – to allow the Lord to increase in relevance and importance and ourselves to decrease in relevance and importance.

- While we're on the topic of historical faith we also should acknowledge the appeal of staying in that kind of faith.
 - Believing what somebody else we trust believes can feel comfortable and comforting.
 - There can be a sense of security and certainty.
 - And it's a lot less work – if we want to know what we believe, we just ask them and they'll tell us what to believe.
 - Sermons can reinforce this feeling.
 - In a sermon you can sometimes get the whole thing presented to you in a seemingly cohesive way – it all fits and makes sense.
 - Whereas when you read the Word for yourself that can be a lot more confusing.
 - There are so many things that are said and done that you just don't know what to do with.
 - It can feel much simpler to leave figuring that stuff out to other people and then they can tell us what to believe.
- But we are called to do more than that – we are called to come and see the Lord for ourselves.

Following Jesus

- Those two disciples of John do go and follow Jesus.
- And when Jesus sees them following Him, He asks them a question: "What do you seek?"
 - "What are you looking for here?"
 - "What's your end goal?"
- And that's a good question to be asked because, if we're still coming out of that historical faith mode, it could catch us off-guard in a useful sort of way.
 - "What am I looking for? I don't know. I was just following because somebody else told me that I was supposed to...."
 - The question pushes us to think for ourselves about what we want and need from the Lord.
 - And we might not know the answer.
 - It might be kind of fuzzy and undefined.
- The disciples' answer is "where are You staying?"
 - We could interpret this, at one level, as the disciples just scrambling to do a chit-chat, getting to know you conversation – "Where are you from? Where are you staying? What do you do for a living?"
 - But, at a deeper level, it's actually a great response to the Lord's question.
 - What are we seeking from following the Lord?
 - We're looking to find out where He stays.
 - We're looking to find the place that our God has prepared for us so that where He is we can be also (John 14:2-3).
 - The place where we can find rest for our souls (Matthew 11:29).
 - The place where God Himself will be with us and be our God (Revelation 21:3).

- And when they ask for that Jesus says, "Come and see."
 - The disciples get to come and see where the Lord stays and they get to stay with Him all day.
 - We don't know what all they talked about in that time but when those disciples leave, they are ready to tell other people, "We have found the Messiah!"

"Come and see."

- Let's spend a bit more time reflecting on the Lord's invitation to the disciples to "Come and see."
- There is a basic and yet very important reality built into this invitation: if we want to see where the Lord is, then we need to move from where we currently are.
- We can be stuck in a certain place spiritually or stuck in a certain mindset and from that place we are unable to see the Lord clearly and we are unable to see that the Lord could really help us.
 - A little bit further on in story, the Lord calls a man named Philip to follow Him and then Philip says to a man named Nathanael, "We have found Him of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets, Jesus, the son of Joseph, from Nazareth."
 - And Nathanael's response to Philip is, "Can anything good be from Nazareth?"
- We can be in a pretty skeptical place about the Lord and whether He actually can offer anything of value to us.
 - If I pray or read the Word or go to church, will anything good actually come of it?
 - Philip's response? "Come and see."
 - He doesn't argue with him: he invites him to see for himself.
 - In order to see for himself, Nathanael has to get up from where he is and move to somewhere different.
 - When we're in a negative mindset we can be pretty positive that we can see everything clearly from where we are but that's just not true.
- To illustrate this to the children at the Family Service this morning, I told them that there are stained glass windows depicting scenes from the Lord's life above the choir stalls in the church.
 - But you can't see them from the pews; you have to come forward to the sides.
 - If you want to see the Lord, you need to come to a different position.
- Going a little deeper, the two commands to "come" and "see" can also represent two kinds of work that we need to do to grow in our faith in the Lord.
- You might remember that our lesson from *True Christianity* talked about two pathways coming into us.
 - Faith in God comes into us on a pathway that comes down from above and first comes into our souls and then into the higher parts of our intellect.
 - Knowledge about God comes into us on a pathway that comes up from below as we take in information from the Lord's written Word through our bodily senses.
 - These things then come together and interact in our intellect and we can develop real and spiritual faith.
- There's work for us to do to help prepare both of those pathways for the Lord to use and we can think of the work we need to do as relating to the two commands to "come" and "see".

- "Come" can relate to the work we need to do to be in the right space to be receptive of the Lord flowing into our souls.
- And "See" can relate to the work we need to do to gather good knowledge of who the Lord is from His revelation.

"Come." Work on the Pathway from Above

- Let's first talk about the work we need to do on the pathway from above.
 - Yes, this is really the Lord's work.
 - He's doing everything but we can be more or less receptive to what He wants to give us.
 - Influx is according to the receiving vessel (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §78).
- How do we make ourselves as receptive as possible? Again, it's repentance and also our sincere efforts to be good and loving people, following the Lord's example.
 - We can see this with Nathanael. (See *Apocalypse Explained* §866.)
 - When he comes and sees the Lord for himself he immediately has a pretty clear sight of who the Lord is and that's because of the work he has already done.
 - The Lord called him, "...truly an Israelite in whom is no deceit."
 - He was someone who had worked hard to be honest, sincere, and trustworthy and that goodness in him was what made him able to see the Lord for who He was.
 - That's also symbolized by the fact that the Lord saw Him sitting under a fig tree—He was someone who bearing good fruits, worthy of repentance (Luke 3:8).
- We might think that that must be enough.
 - Be a good person and the right beliefs will flow in from above.
 - But the pathway from below is also crucially important.

"See." Work on the Pathway from Below

- For one thing, we are not very good at distinguishing where the intuitions we have are from.
 - We might have a certain idea about God that occurs to us and appeals to us and is actually wrong.
 - We need to have the ability to check our intuitions about God against what His Word actually says.
- Also, listen to another passage from *True Christian Religion* about these two pathways and the importance of the pathway from below.
 - *True Christian Religion* §24
 - [T]he oneness of God is inwardly impressed upon the mind of every person, since this idea forms the core of all the influences from God which affect the soul of a person. But the reason why it has failed to come down into people's intellect is the lack of the pieces of knowledge which a person should have to enable them to climb up to meet God. For everyone needs to prepare the way for God, that is, to prepare themselves to receive God, and pieces of knowledge are the means to this end.

- The problem has been the knowledge pathway.
 - The passage goes on to list nine missing pieces of knowledge that are now revealed in the teachings of the New Church to help people be able to see that God is one.
 - Don't you want to know what those nine things are?
 - That will be your homework to do some work to see the Lord better.
 - Look up *True Christian Religion* §24 when you get home.
 - After listing those nine things the passage says this:
 - *True Christian Religion* §24:1-2
 - These pieces of knowledge have up to now been missing, yet it is through them that a person must climb up and get to know the Divine Being.

We say that a person climbs up, but it must be understood that it is God who lifts them up. A person has a free choice in acquiring knowledge; and they seem to get knowledge for themselves from the Word by means of the intellect, and so the person smooths the path for God to come down and lift them up. The pieces of knowledge which enable the human intellect to climb, while God holds it in His hand and guides it, can be compared to the steps of the ladder seen by Jacob, which was set up on earth so that its top reached heaven and angels climbed up by means of it, and Jehovah stood above it (Genesis 28:12-13).

It is quite different when those pieces of knowledge are lacking, or a person treats them with contempt.
- It might be that you personally need to work more on coming to the Lord, opening yourself up to be more receptive to Him flowing into you through repentance; or it might be that you need to buckle down and do some reading and studying to improve your foundation of knowledge about the Lord so that the faith flowing in from the Lord has better building materials to work with.
- Whichever type of work you need to focus on, I would guess that there is work to be done.
 - After Nathanael came and saw Jesus for the first time, he got a pretty clear picture of who Jesus was.
 - He said, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel!"
 - That's pretty good.
 - That's a pretty accurate first impression.
 - And it was also just the beginning.
 - Jesus was and is the King of Israel – but probably not the kind of King of Israel that Nathanael was thinking of and hoping for.
 - It was probably only when Nathanael witnessed Jesus' crucifixion that he realized that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).
- This has got to be true of us too, that we have a lot more to learn about who our God really is, from the pathway from above and the pathway from below.

- One way in which our belief in God can be a little narrow, especially when we're younger, is how much our ideas about God are based on what He can do for us.
 - He's my Saviour.
 - He's looking after me.
 - He's helped me get through this hard time.
- It's great for us to have that kind of personal connection with the Lord our God.
 - Like Nathanael was blown away by the Lord knowing where He was.
 - We need to feel like the Lord understands us where we are.
 - Like the person who wrote Psalm 116 said, "I love the LORD, because He has heard My voice and my supplications" (1).
- And, as time passes, our faith in God will probably mature to be a little bit more about who the Lord is for all people, not just who He is for us.

- With the Lord's help we will be able to continue to grow in our understanding of our God.
 - As the Lord said to Nathanael,
 - "Because I said to you, 'I saw you underneath the fig tree,' you believe? You shall see greater things than these. Amen, amen, I say to you, after this you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:50-51).

Conclusion

- In conclusion, isn't the Lord pretty great?
- He's willing to work with these fallible disciples.
 - Some of them are skeptical, some are selfish, some think they know who He is but are actually a little off-base.
 - And He still works with them, seeing them in their current state and calling them to come towards a better state.
 - He doesn't say, "You're hopeless, get away!"
 - He says, "Come and see."
- And the Lord is also willing to work with us fallible disciples too.
 - Some of our individual current sense of who the Lord is is hopefully pretty accurate; some of it is probably still based on historical faith; and some of our sense of who the Lord is is probably, unfortunately, a product of our own selfish and limited perspective.
 - And somehow the Lord is still willing and able to work with us.
 - He knows just how much better our understanding and faith can be and He says to us, "Come and see."

- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.