January 19, 2020 • Second Sunday after Epiphany • Children's Church

“Where is Jesus Staying”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Isaiah 49:1-7
Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” But I said, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.” And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— he says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, “Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

John 1:29-42
The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I 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.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!”

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When 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?” He 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. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He 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).

Epiphany is the season that takes us from Christmas to Lent. It is the season of light and goes by all too quickly, to my way of thinking. The lectionary readings themselves get us into this fast forward mode. Just two weeks ago, Jesus was a baby in the manger receiving those royal visitors, the Magi. By last week he was already a grown man being baptized by John the Baptist. And today we find him on the go, conversing with the Baptist, and then with Andrew and Simon Peter. So, time might be speeding along, but remember that this season is all about understanding and experiencing Christ as the Light of the World and all that means for our lives and the life of the church.

Today we hear John’s version of the story of the call of the first disciples. It’s not the more familiar version Matthew wrote of the call of the fishermen, but John tells it another way to help us see another meaning in it all.

It goes like this. After John the Baptist had baptized Jesus, John was standing with a couple of his own disciples. They see Jesus pass by and John exclaims: “Here is the Lamb of God!” John’s disciples hear John say this and leave to follow Jesus. Jesus sees them and turns to ask: “What are you looking for?” And they respond with another question. “Rabbi, teacher,” they call him, “where are you staying?” And Jesus says to them: “Come and see.”

Even for the Gospel of John, this is an odd conversation. Two questions. No real answer. Just a longing and then an invitation. Two would-be disciples. Two seekers, just like some of you here this morning. Two students wanting to learn more, to know more, to go deeper. Jesus engages them, giving them agency and responsibility for their own spiritual discernment, asking them: “what are you looking for?”, “what are you after?” He seems to know intuitively that their hearts were hungry, that they were wanting something more for their lives and he pushes them to get clear. “What are you after? What is it you want?”

These guys had been disciples of John the Baptist. They’re on the verge here of changing teams. They’re probably gonna go with Jesus. But first, they’re pushing to know who he really is. Before making up their minds, they’re bold enough to ask. Who are you? Are you of God? Are you the teacher we should trust? Where are you staying, meaning—where is your heart, what are you fundamentally about? Where are you staying? And just as some of you may be asking this morning, in your heart of hearts, they, too, wondered: what are we getting into if we decide that we’ll come stay with you?

Remember, this is all part of the theology of John’s Gospel, his understanding of who Jesus is. At the very beginning of his Gospel, he wrote that in Jesus, God comes to stay with us. The Word became flesh and lived among us. That’s what incarnation is. That’s what we believe about Jesus. The Word made flesh. God with us. God living with us. God present with us here in this life. God abiding with us. God staying with us.

First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica
And so, you see, when these two ask Jesus “where are you staying?” they are picking up this theme. They’re trying to understand it. They’re trying to fathom this mind-boggling notion, that God the Almighty, the Ancient of Days, the Holy of Holies, is, in Christ, coming to stay with us. “Where are you staying?” they ask him. “Are you really staying with us? Are you the answer to our prayer? Are you the one who is come to usher in the reign of God?”

Staying with something or someone long enough to really go deep is not an easy thing to talk about in this fast-paced world of ours. Ours is a world fixated on change and the latest whatever. The 24/7 news cycle. The constant barrage of Facebook updates and Instagram messages. Even that name—Insta-gram—indicates the immediacy of new news and the latest whatever.

The tempo of the Gospel, the tempo of the life of faith, is very different. It’s slow. It’s deliberate. It exists in the moral arc of the universe, which, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, is long, but bends towards justice.

The disciples knew enough to sense that to understand who Jesus was and what he was about, they would have to recalibrate. They would have to stay where he was staying. They would have to dig deep into his true identity and learn his craft, if you will, learn all the ins and outs of his ministry and mission. Jesus draws them in. “Come and see” he says. And the Scripture tells us that indeed, they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. And they began to learn how much more there was to learn and how it would transform their lives.

It’s all about staying, you see: God staying with us in Christ, us staying with God through Christ, us staying with God’s people in the name of Christ. And the way we know that’s what’s happening is by what we see going on in Christ Jesus, the light of the world.

Throughout the New Testament, the word “abide” is used to describe this kind of “staying with.” Jesus said: abide in me as I abide in you.

He invites them to abide with him that they might understand for themselves what is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Come, walk with me. Talk with me. Learn from me. Pray with me. Abide with me.

Abiding, they will come to understand, is about being present to the presence of God in our midst wherever and everywhere we are. It’s about learning to trust that first, God loves us each and all. That no one is beyond the reach of God’s love. God creates us in love, nurtures us in love, walks our daily path with us in love. And so we are to learn to abide in a loving relationship with God or as Bishop Ruben Job has written: to stay in love with God.

To abide in God, to abide in God’s love, means to keep ourselves in close relationship with God. To talk with God in prayer. To praise God in worship. To serve God in service to God’s people, need to pay attention, to devote time and energy to our relationship with God.

As we abide with Christ, we develop a spiritual depth that grounds us in God’s love and peace. The theologian Eberhard Arnold wrote in the 1930s, these words no less true today: “the great agitation in the world of today makes it more and more urgent to gain inner strength in those quiet encounters with Christ that make it possible for us to remain [abide.. in him]. Situated as we are in a world that is so terribly unpeaceful, we need constant nourishment for our inner life…our inner being needs daily the quiet haven of communion with God.”

As Jesus invites his disciples to abide in him, he’s inviting us into a lifetime of learning, practicing living in love. Sometimes failing. Sometimes getting it right. Always moving further along the way. Remaining, staying, continuing on.

For by God’s grace, “love abides.” That is, God gives us time. God slowly crafts us into the people we are created to be, learning to be steadfast and faithful, drawing us into God’s own love, slowly and patiently, molding us into those who, by abiding in that love, come to know a love stronger and more steadfast than comes naturally to any of us. The God of love is the God who creates us for love, who redeems us through love, who sustains us by love, who sends us out to serve others in the power of love. The love that knows no limits, no boundaries, no color lines, no in-group/out-group. The love that draws the circle wide and never ends.

The love that abides.
As disciples, as we stay with Jesus, as we walk where he walks and hear what he hears and feel what he feels, as we see the world through the light of his light, we, too, begin to become a part of his ministry and mission, living out the kingdom of God.

Perhaps this morning you've begun now to ask yourself how your life and priorities could be more shaped by asking yourself how to stay with Jesus a bit more than you do. How do I stay with Jesus, long enough, far enough, to let his life shape my life?

There are many ways to stay with Jesus. One is through prayer, including the kind of walking prayer that people experience while walking the labyrinth in Simkins Hall. You can walk this afternoon any time starting at 3pm. Come as an individual or bring a friend or family. Kids love it! A little boy who walked it for the first time said: “I felt God at the center.” That little boy has discovered for his life a new way to “stay with Jesus.”

Or pray through tying our prayer quilts week after week, taking time for a few moments, to tie a knot on the quilt and experience the presence of God in prayer.

Another way to stay with Jesus is through involvement and service. Participating in the monthly Community Meal with the families and children at Family Place—there’s one coming up this week. Remembering to bring food for the Westside Food Bank when you come to worship. Stretching to give extra to support the work of UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, already on the ground in Puerto Rico and the Philippines.

As this New Year gets underway, I invite you to come and stay with Jesus this year—through prayer and service, through witness and study, through fellowship and giving. Come and see God in Christ, the Lamb of God, sharing the life and suffering of the world. Come and see the world in the light of Christ and his mission. Come and see God here, a people staying with Jesus, a people faithful and bold, committed to the glory and the righteousness of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven.

Where is Jesus staying? Come and see.