

Annual Meeting Address
January 26, 2020
The Rev. Emily Richards

Come and See

“Come and see.” Jesus offers no detailed explanation, puts forth no convincing argument, nor twists any arms. Three little words. A simple and straightforward invitation to his soon-to-be-disciples. Come and see for yourself, Jesus responds to their question, to a deeper yearning within them. Come and be with me. Come and learn. Come and listen. Come and find a place to belong.

It is important to keep in mind that Jesus does not first, or primarily, call them to do a particular job, or to fill a particular role. They are not being asked to serve on a committee, or volunteer for a ministry or become a warden. Instead, it is a call to relationship. The Rev. James Leggett writes, “To respond to such a call for relationship, for intimacy, is very different from signing up to do a piece of work. (Just like falling in love is very different from serving together on a committee). To set out to do a job requires some clarity about what is involved, it is negotiable, it has its limits.... To be called into relationship—is to enter a mystery; it is to move out, full speed ahead, into uncharted darkness. Jesus simply says, “Follow me.” He calls us first to himself—to a personal intimacy and shared life.”

Today we gather to celebrate our shared life in Christ. Yes, we will talk about the work we’ve been doing together over the past year. But what I hope we can see is that at the heart of all the good and necessary work, the business and programs and property is a collective call to relationship with the source of our connectedness to this community and its ministry. Come and see is an invitation for us to follow - to go deeper into that uncharted darkness trusting that Jesus is leading the way. And that we don’t have to have it all figured out, especially on Annual Meeting Sunday.

This past year I laid aside my work for a while; and reconnected with that relationship that first led me to ministry and to all of you. I am grateful for my time to step away and rest in the solitude of God’s love, reclaiming the beauty and truth of my priesthood - that I have been given the amazing privilege of dwelling in the nearness of God with you. As I re-entered into church life after my sabbatical, I recommitted myself to the spiritual practices of ministry, continuing to cultivate my own relationship with Jesus and to help all of you and those beyond these walls do the same. But this has meant that I have had to change some of my well-worn patterns. At times, it has been quite challenging. The voices saying, “Emily, you should be doing this! Why aren’t you

working on that? Why isn't this getting done at the church," can be tough to put aside. But as I returned again and again to the ONE voice saying, Emily, come and see. Come and follow me, I was able to trust that what needs to be done will get done and to be okay with the things left undone. Paying greater attention to that voice, I become more authentic in my priestly vocation.

Jesus' choice of words is obviously compelling to Andrew as well because by the next day, using the very same language, Andrew is extending Jesus' invitation to his brother Peter. Like Jesus, he does not offer any proclamation of what to believe or any list of requirements or demands, but says, "Come and see." Three weeks ago, we formally welcomed our newest members into our community. Half of the folks who stood up and said they wanted to make this place their spiritual home had found their way to us through a personal invitation. Come and experience the fellowship, love and belonging, they were told.

One of my favorite Anne Lamott stories is in her memoir *Traveling Mercies*: "A lost little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where she lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally, a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove for a long time around the neighborhood until she finally saw her church. She told the officer firmly, 'Stop. You can let me out now.' The officer looked back at her confused. 'This is my church,' she said. And I can always find my way home from here.'... 'No matter how bad I am feeling,' Lamott continues, 'how lost or lonely or frightened I am, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home.'" In our technological age where finding deep joy and connectedness can be elusive, where we can easily feel lost or alone, it is our hunger for meaningful relationships that draw us in and sustain us in this place. It is that sense of belonging, of knowing that in the faces of the people gathered around the holy table we can solace, strength and healing.

There is, I believe, another facet to the invitation to "come and see." It involves greater risk and vulnerability than inviting our friends and neighbors to see what God is up to among us. It is the invitation to participate in the Jesus Movement as Presiding Bishop Curry keeps proclaiming; to find Jesus outside the confines of the established church where most of our sisters and brothers dwell. They don't dwell here with us on Sunday mornings. But that doesn't mean that the Body of Christ is not alive and well. We need to see with new eyes where God is at work. The Holy Spirit has always blown in unexpected directions. She is no different in 2020 AD than she was in 120 AD.

I was reminded of the unexpected gift of the Holy Spirit's power this Advent. I decided to make a seemingly small change to my practice of leading Evening Prayer. The beginning of the service coincides with many parents picking up their kids from the nursery school. I felt that I needed to include them in this time of prayer by opening up the chapel doors. On one night when I was the only one praying, two little girls ran in and started talking to me. The second time they ran in I showed them the Advent wreath. They told me about lighting their candles during Chanukah and together we lit the wreath. The third time they ran in, insisting I meet their dad. I left the chapel and we all talked in the hallway before I resumed my praying. Our conversations continued throughout Advent. I began seeing our time together as an integral piece of this prayer. Since then I've had several occasions to be in the chapel with the doors closed. Each time I left the chapel I found a note on my wheelchair written in the hand of the older child saying hello, asking me how I was doing, and that she and her sister missed me. If I hadn't have opened myself up to making that small change, opening the doors of the chapel and more importantly my heart, I wouldn't have met Jesus through those precious little girls. Come and see, Jesus tells me and you. Come and see where I am to be found in people, places and neighborhoods, you may have overlooked.

A leading voice in discerning the mission of the church in the 21st century is the Rev. Dwight J. Zscheile, an Episcopal priest and theology professor who grew up in Silicon Valley and never even entered a church until he was an adult. In his book, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*, he writes, ""This work of translating Christian faith and practice into new cultural vernaculars requires deep listening to God, to the tradition, and to neighbors. It is less about bringing energy to catalyze flagging participation in church programs and activities and more about tracing the energy of the Holy Spirit among the people of God. It is less about defining bold goals for institutional growth than refocusing the congregation's life on cycles of listening, discerning, experimenting and reflecting . . . This is a moment to reenter the central stories of our faith, stories that are not about institutional success or progress, but God claiming and calling unlikely, fallible people into the adventure of God's mission. This mission proceeds in the Bible through a great deal of messiness, error, and ambiguity, not the linear-sequential steps of a modern strategic plan. God the great innovator calls humanity into participation and partnership in this innovation."

Reflecting more on my favorite Anne Lamott story, I realize that the church for that little girl was not the end of her journey. It was not the place where she stopped for good. But a place from which she was able to continue on her journey, giving her the courage to get back out into the world so that she could find her way home. The church is both where we find Jesus and his love for us and it is also a community which enables us to go back into our world and discover where Jesus has gone ahead of us.

We have been given an unbelievable opportunity as the church to risk opening our doors, our hearts and lives to see God in new ways, experiencing Jesus with fresh purpose and vision, and participating with God and our neighbor in this innovative endeavor. "Come and see," Jesus said. These three little words changed Andrew's life and then changed Peter's life. This invitation into a new relationship changed the lives of all of those first followers of Jesus. And if we allow it, it can change us. I pray as we enter a new year and a new decade, we take hold of this moment, stepping out in courage and faith with God and one another on yet another great adventure as the people of St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

For what was, thanks be to God. For what is, thanks be to God. For what shall be, thanks be to God. Amen.