

## Grace upon Grace

What are you looking for?  
Come and see.  
You have a new name.  
Follow me.  
I know who you are.  
You're in for more than you expect.

Those few simple sentences sum up the appearance of Jesus on the stage in the Gospel of John. The stage has already been set by a fabulous prologue before the action begins, in which we're told that the main character has been around since the beginning of time, literally. The eternal Word, as old as God himself, has come to the earth as flesh and blood. Grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.

That's the cosmic setting given to us in the prologue. The earthly setting is provided by John the Baptist, who spends a fair amount of time explaining who he *isn't*. He does point toward one who is to come, however, and sure enough, the next day Jesus shows up. John calls him the "Lamb of God," and describes his baptism in the past tense. The next day Jesus shows up again and John utters the same words, "Behold the Lamb of God," but this time a couple of John's disciples overhear him. Intrigued, they take off after Jesus, who notices them, stops, and says his opening line: "What are you looking for?"

I call that the Jesus question. What are you looking for? Sometimes he asks it in a different way. When a blind man came up to him, Jesus said, "What do you want me to do for you?" (As though it weren't obvious that he wanted his sight!) That's the version I use whenever someone from the street comes by and wants to talk with me. At some point in their story I will ask the Jesus question: What do you want me to do for you? Remarkably, not everyone is looking for a handout. Some just want to talk. It's useful to remember that when anyone is telling you about their difficulties. If you're worried that "what are you looking for" is rather abrupt, you can say, "Do you want help with your problem, or do you just want me to listen?" Do that before you start giving them advice. That's what Jesus did.

When John's disciple was asked "what are you looking for," he didn't really answer it. He asked Jesus another question: "Where are you staying?" So Jesus got to deliver his second line. "Come and see." What a wonderful, open-ended invitation. Walk along with me. See for yourself. Don't take my word for it. It's the classic statement of evangelism—come and see.

One of those two disciples was Andrew, and he was so excited that he went and got his brother Simon. We've found the promised one! So Simon scrambled up and followed Andrew, and they both came to Jesus. Jesus took one look and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which means Peter)." [Both Cephas and Peter actually mean Rock.] In other words, Simon, you have a new name.

The next day Jesus headed out to look for Philip. When he found him he uttered another characteristic Jesus phrase: "Follow me." Two words. I could spend the rest of this sermon, the

rest of this day, the rest of my life, digging through the depth of those two words. They are why Judith and I are wearing priestly stoles. They are why you are here today. They are why this cathedral building was built, and why Christians came to this area, let alone this country, in the first place. Follow me.

Philip was so impressed that he went to find his friend Nathanael, just as Andrew had gone to find Peter. When Andrew told Peter about the Messiah, however, Peter was curious. Nathanael is sarcastic. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he asked. Substitute your favorite place. Can anything good come out of Des Moines? Can anything good come out of Springfield? Out of Washington? But Philip has already learned his lessons so well that he gave the Jesus response: “Come and see.” Invitation, pure and simple. No attitude, no coercion, no wondering if Nathanael was really the right kind. Just come and see. So Nathanael followed.

When they reached Jesus, he made it clear that he already knew a lot about Nathanael. “Ah, here’s a straightforward man, without deceit!” I know who you are! Stunned, Nathanael’s sarcasm vanished into worship. “You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus replied as is amused, all of that simply because I said I saw you under a fig tree? You’re in for a lot more than you expect. You’re going to see something that looks a lot like Jacob’s ladder reaching up to heaven with angels going up and down.

Again and again throughout the Bible we hear those same simple sentences, spoken by God through the eternal Word. The boy Samuel heard them when he went running and Eli said, what are you looking for? Eventually Samuel stood still long enough to hear God say, follow me. What I love about this story of Samuel is God’s persistence. It took four times before God could get Samuel to stop and listen! How many times has God been calling you? When are *you* going to stop and listen?

Psalms 139 is the most wonderful statement of how God knows us better than we know ourselves – our sitting down, rising up, thinking and resting, known even before we were born. Perhaps Nathanael was thinking about this psalm when he realized that Jesus knew him just as thoroughly as God did. Why else would he suddenly call Jesus the Son of God?

Jesus will go on to say many more things in the Gospel of John. Some of them will be hard to understand. But there’s nothing difficult about his first lines on this stage.

They are words of open invitation: *What are you looking for? Follow me.*

Words that show us how to bring anyone, even skeptics, to the mystery of Christ: *Come and see.*

And words of love, promise, and hope: *I know who you are. I’m giving you a new name. You’re in for more than you expect.*

Yes, this Jesus is a mystery, just as we were warned that he would be. But he’s a mystery we can see and feel and touch, and encounter every week in bread and wine. He’s a mystery who says that God loves us, unconditionally. Thanks be to God for the mystery of Jesus Christ and his simple words. Truly, from him we have all received grace upon grace.

[Epiphany 2: 1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139; John 1:43-51.]