

"FINDING JESUS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 17, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

Bill Bryson tells of traveling to Hannibal, Missouri, to visit the boyhood home of Mark Twain. He describes the house as a "trim, white-washed house with green shutters, set incongruously in the middle of downtown". He said it cost him a couple of dollars to walk around the site and he expressed mild disappointment with the house itself. He goes on to write,

"It's supposed to be a faithful reproduction of the original interiors, but there were wires and water sprinklers clumsily evident in every room. I also very much doubt that young Samuel Clemens' bedroom had Armstrong vinyl on the floor or that his sister's bedroom had a plywood partition in it."

The house is owned by the city of Hannibal and it attracts 135,000 visitors each year. Bryson was somewhat disappointed that he wasn't able to step inside the house. "You look through the windows" he says. At each window there's a recorded message telling about each room. As he made his way from window to window, he asked another tourist what he thought of it. The stranger replied,

"Oh, I think it's great. I come here whenever I'm in this city....two or three times a year. Sometimes I go out of my way to come here...."

"Really?" responded Bryson, somewhat surprised. "Yeah" answered the friendly stranger,

"I must have been here twenty, thirty times by now. This is a real shrine, you know."

They walked and talked some more.

"Would you say the house is just like Twain described it in his books?" "I don't know" said the stranger, "I've never read any of his books...."

→ Visiting his shrine, but ignoring his books. Doubtless there are some followers of Jesus who are satisfied with that same superficial approach. They visit His shrine, but never read His teachings. Some of us, however, want to go farther. Some of us want to know Jesus - not just as an interesting historical figure, but as the Living Son of God...which introduces the question: how do we find Jesus? How do we best find Him? Let me suggest some ways.

A DRAMATIC ACT OF REVELATION

First-off, we sometimes find Him through a dramatic act of revelation. From my experience, it doesn't happen that way to many of us, but sometimes God breaks into the lives of people in a very clear and an unmistakable act of disclosure. That is exactly what happened to John the Baptist in today's scripture reading.

At first, John did not recognize Jesus. Even though they were cousins, he did not really know who Jesus was until that day Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized.

It was then that the "heavens opened" and the Spirit descended like a dove and rested on Jesus. Sometimes it happens that way. Something dramatic takes place and our lives are transformed - forever changed! That moment of spiritual

A woman, working in a small town in Latin America, felt despair. She had been experiencing some marital problems, as well as conflicts with people with whom she worked. One day, without warning, an earthquake struck and in those moments of fear and panic, she ran with others to the relative safety of a garden plaza as buildings shattered and dust billowed. She recalls and these are her own words,

"For those moments I saw everything so clearly...how I could become much kinder to my husband, and how other relationships could work out. In an instant - and with much gratitude - I saw how it would be so easy for me to turn things around."

In that dramatic moment, this woman had glimpsed how the brokenness in her life could be mended, healed. At that moment, she saw clearly how she could bring healing in her life. At that moment, it was as if God had spoken to her in a very dramatic way - "person to person". But back to John. God had told John in something of a personal "epiphany",

"He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."

When John saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus in the form of a dove, he knew without a doubt that Jesus was the Messiah. John believed that day because of a personal act of revelation. For him, the "heavens opened" and he knew!

And sometimes that happens to people. The truth of God comes into their lives in such a dramatic fashion that they can scarcely deny that they have been in God's presence. I remember one such January night back in 1966 over here at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine when Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a crowd of 5,000 people. As a member of the clergy, I was privileged to have a seat "up front", not far from the pulpit...close enough to "take in" the man and the message. I remember returning home and saying "tonight the heavens really opened" for me. The "word" of God's love delivered to an audience that was not entirely receptive and happy to hear it. A personal "epiphany". Most dramatic!

THROUGH THE WITNESS OF OTHERS

Another way of finding Him is through the witness of others. A day later, John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching and exclaims, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". Two of John's followers hear John's witness and they begin to follow Jesus - not because of any dramatic vision they had, but because they trusted John.

And my guess would be that this is the way that most of us have come to Christ...through the witness of others. It may have been our parents, or a spouse or a teacher, or a strong personality who made a profound impression on us...but somewhere along the way the witness of someone else made the critical difference in our lives. Think about it. Who was it for you.

In Peggy Payne's novel, Revelation, a minister by the name of Swain Hammond has a vision which he describes to his congregation. Later on, he comes

to the decision that it would be best to leave that church and he proceeds to announce the decision on a Sunday morning at the end of a service, which he does. Later on that day, a woman in the congregation, a parishioner by the name of Gladys comes to visit him and she says to him,

"You must not leave the Church". Taken by her good will, Dr. Hammond replies, "That's kind of you and I do appreciate your coming..." But Gladys interrupts him before he can get out the last words. "I'm not trying to say something nice to you....it's very important" she says. Now earlier the pastor had spent some time with Gladys's mother-in-law.

Gladys goes on to tell him....

"I know what you said in your sermon...you think you can't tell anyone about God. Well...." There followed one of those awkward moments when no one said anything.

"You came over and sat with my mother-in-law. I was surprised at myself that I would let you do any such thing, but I did. I was glad to get away". (The simple act of her pastor caring enough about her made all the difference in the world to Gladys) "When you did that" she tells her pastor, "it seemed like all at once there might be things I could still hope for. The way I have been feeling, everything was over for me."

Her voice began to tremble a little, then she got herself under control. "I don't know the Scriptures like you do, Dr. Hammond, but I was raised on it. The Bible commands that we love one another". Tears welled up in her eyes. "It was a very loving thing that you did. I can't just keep silent and let you go away". Gladys, in a passionate plea says, "Dr. Hammond...you are a good disciple. You mustn't stop now."

It was clear that this pastor's witness of love and concern had had a profound effect on the faith of this woman. That has been true for many of us. We have found Christ through the witness of others - Sunday School teachers, kindly neighbors, devout parents...and so on. Their witness has made the critical difference in our own Christian pilgrimage, in our own walk with Christ.

WHILE LIVING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Christian life.

Finally, there are others of us who have discovered Christ while living the

Because of John's witness, the two men who were with him wanted to find out more about Jesus. Now notice up to this point that Jesus has not said a word. He has not preached a sermon. He has not told a parable. These two men begin to follow Him simply because of the witness of John the Baptist. Jesus noticed them following Him and asked them what they were seeking. They replied that they wanted to know about Him. Jesus issued the personal invitation to "Come and see". And they did! They stayed with Him all that day. They became His disciples. Today, Jesus issues the same invitation to other "would-be-followers" - COME AND SEE!

Some may recall that two months before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to his congregation at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta about his death in what strangely enough would shortly become his eulogy. Remember those stirring words:

"Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral" said King to his congregation. "If any of you are around when I have to meet 'my' day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Noble Peace Prize; that's not important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards; that's not important.

I'd like to have someone mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like someone to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to be able to say that I did try to visit those in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."

Dr. King concluded with these words,

"I won't have any money left behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind."

One may wonder...did Martin Luther King have that level of commitment when he first began his ministry? It's doubtful. We were at Boston University's School of Theology at the same time in the early fifties. I was not aware of his presence even though we probably took one or two courses together. It was not until the bus strike in Montgomery in 1955 that I first became aware of his name. I'm sure he had youthful enthusiasm and strong convictions in those Boston years. He was well brought up, with an outstanding Baptist preacher as a father. But people, I think, who are truly captured by the spirit of Christ do so generally after years of walking in the "footsteps" of Christ. Our faith is so often "validated" and grows and matures as we "come and see". I think that life has a way of deepening those convictions.

Most of us have been raised in the Church. There never has been that "one moment" when the "heavens" suddenly opened and we saw the spirit "descend". Yet we have walked with Jesus almost since we took our first tiny steps as small children. Our faith is just as real as those who have more dramatic stories to tell. We are those who have a "Come and See" faith.

OUR TASK IS TO PROVIDE A WITNESS

witness that others may find Him and see Him.

Regardless then, of how we found Christ, our task is to provide the kind of

One of the two men who followed Jesus that day long ago was a fisherman named Andrew. The day that Andrew spent with Jesus changed his life. He went to find his brother, Simon, who was also a fisherman. Andrew told his brother, Simon, "We have found the Messiah!" Perhaps Andrew had never been so excited about anything in his life as he was that day. Simon looked into the eyes of his brother and knew he was serious and sincere. Simon wanted to meet this teacher that his brother was so excited about. Andrew took his brother to meet Jesus and remember the scene that followed?

Jesus looked at Simon and said, "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas". We know Simon or Cephas as Peter - leader of the early Church. Peter became a disciple of Jesus "thanks" to the witness of his brother, Andrew....and history would never again be the same.

CLOSING STORY William Willimon, a Professor at Duke Divinity School, tells a story that I can identify with. He speaks of a friend who visited the Soviet Union back in the 1970s. Upon his return he announced that the Church behind the Iron Curtain was mostly,

"...irrelevant because the only people there are little old ladies...."

Dr. Willimon writes,

"Looking back now at the collapse of communism, the difficulties of rebuilding the Soviet Union after a long period of spiritual bankruptcy, I hope my friend would now say, 'Thank God for the little old ladies'. Their existence provided a continuing, visible, political rebuke to the Soviets."

I like that. How wonderful it would be if our witness was as effective as that of those "little old ladies". I can identify with some of this because when I came here as a young pastor years ago...all we had were about 13 little old ladies and two men. I've buried every one of those ladies except Daisy Herrick. I could give you their names, maybe some day I will. But they were here! Long on loyalty, commitment, fervor. Their witness spoke to me. If they believed their church had a future, who was I - a 27 year old young preacher just getting started...who was I to question their commitment, their conviction, their vision. It spoke to me and I salute them.

What a joyous and challenging task is before us. Having found Christ, or more correctly, having been found by Christ, we find others - that they, too, may "come and see!"

PRAYER We thank You, O God, for the life of Jesus - for the wonder of it, the power of it, the beauty and the glory of it, the simplicity of it, the kindness and the compassion. Open our eyes that we may see that life wherever it expresses itself in our midst, and when we see it, give us the courage to believe once again that in finding Him, we have found something that surpasses everything that this world can offer. In His name and spirit, we now pray. Amen.

VISITORS: Sunday, January 10, 1993

Weather: Very cold, cloudy and windy! Not the best of days.

Attendance: 151 adults and 25 children and infants.
TOTAL: 176

1992: 210	1985: 160	1978: 144
1991: 209	1984: 159	1977: 155
1990: 173	1983: 157	1976: 161
1989: 142	1982: 152	1975: 146
1988: 153	1981: 194	1974: 127
1987: 167	1980: 167	1973: 138
1986: 154	1979: 133	1972: 126

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Sunday evening attendance was between 125 and 150. Offering: \$ 249.25

1. IT Miss Stacey Staaterman: 301 East 79th Street, 3 L
New York, New York 10021
Telephone: 734 -8198

Pink card. Letter. Signed visitor card. 24 - 29 age group. UM from Jesse Lee Memorial UM in Ridgefield, Ct. PC will follow up....also make reference in note...."Your pastor, Randy Day, is a good friend...." Would like to know more about our Church.

2. IT Mr. Mason Pope: 325 East 83rd Street Apt. 2 A
New York, New York 10028
Telephone: no listing

Pink card. Letter. Second visit. Here back on December the 13th or 20th. Went to school with Tracey Thornblade. Coffee hour on first visit. Greeted at door by PC. PC knows his family background...aunt and father in South Carolina. Mid to late twenties...or it could be mid twenties...probably is. Good looking young man...personable.

INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION (picked up at door by "ever-alert" Sharon...)

3. IT Arpelleh Jean (212) 996 - 7998.

Ivory Coast. 5' 9" mustache...black. PC greeted him...two Sundays in a row.

(over)

BACK AGAIN LIST (Notes and Names...)

1. Mrs. Yolonda Souza: children Jonathan (off to France for three weeks) and sister, Lauren. Father, Luis, comes with them occasionally.
2. Holly Kirkpatrick: fifth or sixth visit . New Canaan, Ct.
3. Kathryn and Paul Giardina: 2nd visit. UM's out in East Hampton on most weekends...but when in city, they will be worshipping with us. Have a child, too.
4. Jim Randall and Oliver.
5. Rachel Marston
6. Dan Lamprecht
7. Jennifer Coward
8. Wayne and Martha Hulbert.
9. Charles Liotta and son, Nic.
10. Linda Hutcherson

PASTORAL PRAYER: January 17, 1993

O GOD, OUR FATHER - in the mystery and the wonder of worship, we would once again draw near to You. Make us sensitive to Your spirit and to Your nearness in these moments of prayer.

ENFOLD US with Your loving care.

SPEAK to each of us the word we need to hear, that special word that will lift us and make a difference in our daily lives. heal us...

MAY WE FIND in every act of our worship - in the sounds of the organ, the singing of the hymns, the anthems of the choir, the reading of the Scripture and the preaching of Your Word - in all of these may we feel Your spirit deep within us...at work...wrestle with us, O God, until we are conquered by Your love.

THOU GOD OF HOPE AND COMFORT...be near to those present who may be feeling the burden of age, or the pain of illness, or the lure of temptation, the anguish of indecision, or the ~~inner~~ stress of anxiety and ~~uncertainty~~.

WORK THROUGH nurses and physicians, social workers and teachers, counsellors and psychiatrists, writers and lawyers, public servants and elected government leaders...all who write where others read...all who influence others for good to bring hope and healing, peace and justice to our life in this world.

OUR PRAYERS this hour reach out to include loved ones and dear friends from whom we are separated by distance, but from we are not separated by love and concern.

We pray for those at the head of affairs in our nation in recent years, and also for those who in coming days will soon be leading us. We would pray that their greatest ambition will be to serve You and to do Your will...then shall our beloved land fill the mission You long ago appointed to it and we shall continue to be blessed by Your Almighty Hand.

LORD, GOD - FATHER OF US ALL...we pray that You will direct us in our worship. Enrich and purify our lives. Forgive us for our sins...for having done things we should not have done and also for failing to do that which we should have done. Make us ready for an adventure with Christ in a world that needs to hear His Word and to follow in His Way.

In the name of the Good Shepherd who gently brings us home, and who knows His sheep by name. In His name we pray.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, January 17, 1993

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of welcome to the visitors...pleased you're here with us this morning, and we hope that we shall have opportunity to greet yoube free in the sharing...fill out, sign one...
- B. If time permits, join us downstairs for coffee and a bit of fellowship. Come, worship with us...come, work with us...
- C. This church has deep roots....doing the Lord's work here at this busy corner of His Kingdom. Soon be celebrating our: 156th year...we like to say that we minister here in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are "listed up" for you in the bulletin. Note the meetings set for this week: PPR (tonight); Administrative Council (Tuesday evening); Finance (~~Thursday evening~~). re-scheduled for January 28
- B. Also, both the "Hounds" and the Aldersgate Class will be meeting. And along with the Sunday morning Adult Bible Class, these groups offer good opportunity for spiritual growth, exploration and faith maturing with others.... note too the flyers...
 1. Lifting up the needs of the Yorkv Common Pantry...2. Great Book Series...beginning on the 28th.
- C. Looking ahead:
 1. Superbowl Bake Sale - two weeks from today for the All Church Picnic of June....Doreen Morales, Coordinator, and we invite you to support it.... donation and purchase. Good cause.
 2. Adult Fellowship Superbowl Party two weeks from this evening at the parsonage. Always more fun to watch an event like the Superbowl with friends. You're invited....enjoy the spectacle with others.
 3. Winter. Rummage Sale. February 6th - three weeks from yesterday. Workers are being enlisted....sign up to lend a hand.
- D. The Financial Canvass is now in its final moments. Good news is that we're ~~still needing pledges of over 1993~~...getting closer to our goal. Not so good news is...still in need of another 50 pledges...and \$6,000....best news of all is that there's still time....but the Canvass officially ends with the Finance Meeting this Thursday night. Last public word for a while.
Thursday night, Jan. 28th...

OFFERING:

"More blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit...

CORAL PRAYER: January 17, 1993

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OUR PRAYERS this hour reach out to include loved ones and dear friends from whom we are separated by distance, but from whom we are not separated by love and concern.

WE PRAY, TOO, FOR each other...for those sitting near us in the pews this morning...for those with whom we shall be talking to at the coffee hour.

Grant that that person may be blessed with inner peace and tranquility, with the perspective of the "higher ground" that worship so often gives to us.

D, GOD - FATHER OF US ALL...we pray that You will direct us in our worship. Enrich and purify our lives. Forgive us for our sins...for having done things we should not have done and also for failing to do that which we should have done. Make us ready for an adventure with Christ in a world that needs to hear His Word and to follow in His Way.

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Because of John's witness, the two men who were with him wanted to find out more about Jesus. Now notice up to this point that Jesus has not said a word. He has not preached a sermon. He has not told a parable. These two men begin to follow Him simply because of the witness of John the Baptist. Jesus noticed them following Him and asked them what they were seeking. They replied that they wanted to know about Him. Jesus issued the personal invitation to "Come and see". And they did! They stayed with Him all that day. They became His disciples. Today, Jesus issues the same invitation to other "would-be-followers" - COME AND SEE!

Some may recall that two months before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to his congregation at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta about his death in what strangely enough would shortly become his eulogy. Remember those stirring words:

"Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral" said King to his congregation. "If any of you are around when I have to meet 'my' day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Noble Peace Prize; that's not important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards; that's not important.

I'd like to have someone mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like someone to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to be able to say that I did try to visit those in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."

Dr. King concluded with these words,

"I won't have any money left behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind."

One may wonder...did Martin Luther King have that level of commitment when he first began his ministry? It's doubtful. We were at Boston University's School of Theology at the same time in the early fifties. I was not aware of his presence even though we probably took one or two courses together. It was not until the bus strike in Montgomery in 1955 that I first became aware of his name. I'm sure he had youthful enthusiasm and strong convictions in those Boston years. He was well brought up, with an outstanding Baptist preacher as a father. But people, I think, who are truly captured by the spirit of Christ do so generally after years of walking in the "footsteps" of Christ. Our faith is so often "validated" and grows and matures as we "come and see". I think that life has a way of deepening those convictions.

Most of us have been raised in the Church. There never has been that "one moment" when the "heavens" suddenly opened and we saw the spirit "descend". Yet we have walked with Jesus almost since we took our first tiny steps as small children. Our faith is just as real as those who have more dramatic stories to tell. We are those who have a "Come and See" faith.

OUR TASK IS TO PROVIDE A WITNESS

witness that others may find Him and see Him.

Regardless then, of how we found Christ, our task is to provide the kind of

One of the two men who followed Jesus that day long ago was a fisherman named Andrew. The day that Andrew spent with Jesus changed his life. He went to find his brother, Simon, who was also a fisherman. Andrew told his brother, Simon, "We have found the Messiah!" Perhaps Andrew had never been so excited about anything in his life as he was that day. Simon looked into the eyes of his brother and knew he was serious and sincere. Simon wanted to meet this teacher that his brother was so excited about. Andrew took his brother to meet Jesus and remember the scene that followed?

Jesus looked at Simon and said, "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas". We know Simon or Cephas as Peter - leader of the early Church. Peter became a disciple of Jesus "thanks" to the witness of his brother, Andrew....and history would never again be the same.

CLOSING STORY William Willimon, a Professor at Duke Divinity School, tells a story that I can identify with. He speaks of a friend who visited the Soviet Union back in the 1970s. Upon his return he announced that the Church behind the Iron Curtain was mostly,

"...irrelevant because the only people there are little old ladies...."

Dr. Willimon writes,

"Looking back now at the collapse of communism, the difficulties of rebuilding the Soviet Union after a long period of spiritual bankruptcy, I hope my friend would now say, 'Thank God for the little old ladies'. Their existence provided a continuing, visible, political rebuke to the Soviets."

I like that. How wonderful it would be if our witness was as effective as that of those "little old ladies". I can identify with some of this because when I came here as a young pastor years ago...all we had were about 13 little old ladies and two men. I've buried every one of those ladies except Daisy Herrick. I could give you their names, maybe some day I will. But they were here! Long on loyalty, commitment, fervor. Their witness spoke to me. If they believed their church had a future, who was I - a 27 year old young preacher just getting started...who was I to question their commitment, their conviction, their vision. It spoke to me and I salute them.

What a joyous and challenging task is before us. Having found Christ, or more correctly, having been found by Christ, we find others - that they, too, may "come and see!"

PRAYER