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There and Back Again

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“There and Back Again”¹

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Text: John 1:29–41 (A—Epiphany 2)

Dearly Beloved: We are gathered here today, in the presence of God, because at some point in our lives, like the two disciples of John the Baptist we meet in today’s Gospel, we decided to investigate whether or not what we have been told about Jesus of Nazareth is true. Whatever the particular way in which the message was delivered to us, what you and I have been told is, basically, the same thing John told his own disciples: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And, now that we *are* following Jesus, today he turns and asks us the same question he asked Andrew and his unnamed companion: “What are you looking for?”

That’s an important question for anyone who follows Jesus to hear. What *are* we looking for? Are we looking for miraculous solutions to the problems we face in life? Are we looking for guarantees of health, wealth and success? Are we looking for an eternal life insurance policy? Are we looking for God’s approval, or for divine protection from the kinds of misfortune that only seem to happen to people we meet on the six o’clock news—but that we know, and fear, may strike us at any moment?

The answer, sisters and brothers, is “Yes”. At least, these are the kinds of things the followers of John the Baptist were looking for. Like us, they were looking for the fulfillment of their hopes and for freedom from their fears. They were looking for the Messiah. And so, they answered Jesus’ question with a question of their own: “Rabbi, where are you staying?”

Their caution is understandable. They wanted to make sure that Jesus would turn out to be the Messiah John believed he was—and we draw many conclusions (not always accurate ones)—about the character of people from the neighbourhoods and houses they live in, or by the hotels they can afford when they are away from home. Just a few verses later, for example, Nathanael uses that measuring stick to determine that Jesus couldn't possibly be a legitimate candidate for Messiah: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Nathanael, like most of his friends and neighbours—as well as John the Baptist's disciples—expected the Messiah to be a powerful, military leader whom God would use to overthrow the foreign authority of Rome and bring in God's own reign. He had certain expectations of the Messiah; and he doubted that they could be fulfilled by someone who lived in Nazareth. But Nathanael received the same invitation Jesus extended to Andrew and his fellow-disciple—an invitation also extended to us: "Come and see."

The place where Jesus lives can't be adequately described in words. It needs to be entered, seen and experienced. The invitation to come and see where Jesus lives, is an invitation to enter, to see, to experience the place *from* which Jesus comes, and the place *to* which Jesus returns. His is no ordinary place! John hints at that by commenting "... they remained with him *that day*." The place where Jesus lives is a place in which those who follow him *cannot* live permanently. Not yet! But what Andrew and his companion saw during that day with Jesus was enough to convince them that he truly is the Messiah, and to inspire them to tell others the good news!

What they must have seen is the same thing you and I see today, and *every* time we celebrate Holy Communion: a vision of life as it will be in the reign of God! Life in God's reign is life with the sin of the world taken away—life without any obstacles to our relationship with God or with one another. Life in the reign of God is life where rich and poor, young and old, black and white, men, women and children—all people—find fulfillment of their hopes and freedom from their fears. Life in the reign of God *is* holy communion! The sacrament of Christ's body and blood we share in Eucharist is a foretaste, a promise of the holy communion we will *live* in God's reign forever—when the time comes.

Like Andrew and his companion, we too cannot yet remain there—here— forever. With them we return to the world to live according to the vision we have received, and to share our vision with others—with any and all others—looking for the Messiah we have found around this altar. The altar around which we gather, stands not only in this sanctuary; it also stands in the reign of God, where Jesus lives, and where he led Andrew and his friend. And that glimpse into their future replaced their expectation of a conquering-hero Messiah with the promise of a suffering Messiah who, through his own death and resurrection, gives us life not according to our expectations, but according to our deepest needs.

In baptism, you and I have been invited into the same encounter with the Messiah. Like Andrew, who went and found his brother Peter, you and I are sent to bring others to Jesus. And all we need to do to fulfil our baptismal ministry is extend to them the same invitation we have received: “Come and see.” Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Lamb of God who, by his cross, takes away the sin of the world, promises to do the rest!

Notes

¹ This is the subtitle of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*.