

## January 19, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [John 1:35–51](#)

TITLE: **Come and See**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

In 1896, amateur American astronomer Percival Lowell was in his 40s when he trained his telescope upon the planet Venus. He had already spent quite some time studying the planet Mars and surprised the world with descriptions of how there were canals on the red planet's surface—canals that other astronomers had trouble verifying, but which Lowell insisted were there. Now when he looked at Venus, Lowell saw a fixed dark spot on the planet with a few pronounced spokes radiating out from it. Again other scientists had trouble verifying Lowell's observations, but he was a noted astronomer and his findings definitely captured the public's imagination. Canals on Mars—spokes on Venus—perhaps there was life out there in the universe! Earlier this century, the mystery of Lowell's canals was solved by an optometrist. Lowell used a very small aperture on his telescope to study these distant planets—an opening that mirrored the size of the opening in his own retina and thus caused images of the blood vessels in Lowell's own eyes to be reflected onto the image coming from the telescope lens. As one author put it, Lowell wasn't seeing other life; he was seeing the imprint of his own gaze.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing what is right before you is not always a simple process. Cataracts and stigmatism distort what is before us. We project ourselves, our own prejudices and beliefs, onto what we see and that changes everything. Just ask Percival Lowell. Yet a couple times in today's gospel lesson, people are confronted with this teacher and healer, Jesus of Nazareth—confronted with a movement away from ignorance, doubt and disbelief to a life of faith—and the invitation to “Come and see.” Something more than inviting us to trust simple visual evidence must be at work in those words “come and see.”

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we are told that the early disciples of Jesus were called by him, for example, to come and be fishers of people. John's gospel takes a slightly different approach to these same events. John has the early disciples discover who Jesus is after being invited by one of their own colleagues. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and called him “the Lamb of God,” which prompted two of John's disciples to follow Jesus and learn from him. One of them was Andrew, who then told his brother Peter about Jesus and brought him into the circle of disciples. Later, Jesus called out to Philip and said “follow me,” which then prompted Philip to find his friend, Nathanael, and tell him that this rabbi from Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God.

There's a centrifugal pattern active here. Christ acts and invites, which ripples out to a person here and a person there, who themselves become the inviters of the next wave of disciples, and so on. It is accurate to say that we are the beneficiaries of the very first cluster of faith invitations; and for Christian faith to continue we must tell others about Jesus and invite them to “come and see.”

This type of explicit evangelism may make you feel uncomfortable, but it really shouldn't. Too many of us suffer under the false belief that evangelism means you have to have a ready answer to everyone's questions about the church. I constantly have to battle the tendency that I have to be the resident expert on Christianity and able to refute every atheistic argument from the Enlightenment onward. Now it is true that sometimes you have to correct a dumb opinion with simple truth. One of my favorite anecdotes involves a time years ago when the boxer Muhammad Ali refused to fasten his seatbelt prior to takeoff on an airplane. When the flight attendant told him to do so, he replied, "Superman don't need no seat belt." To which the attendant wisely replied, "Superman don't need no airplane."

When people have questions about Christianity, even negative, doubting ones, it shows that there is at least a spark of interest about this subject. They are curious enough to have an opinion on the matter. Our job isn't to refute and resolve those doubts. Our job is to build on their curiosity and invite them to come, experience and see for themselves. We do evangelism all the time for lots of other things in life. We tell people about a new restaurant they should visit or a movie they should see. In the same way, each of you could name one aspect of our congregational life (a choir anthem, a comment in Sunday School, a group we're hosting at ELPC, or even, heaven forbid, something you heard in a sermon) and then conclude that comment with the invitation, *you should come sometime and see what's going on at our church*. That's it. Plant the seed. Spark their curiosity. Your job isn't to think for someone else. Your job is to invite them and trust that God is at work in their lives and will take things from there.

Later today Beth and I will fly to Spain for our sabbatical. I am very mindful that there is a lot going on at ELPC right now with preparations for our annual meeting next month as well as retirements and job searches for new positions, and that we'll be away during an important season. Yet remember this: No healthy church can ever be totally dependent on any one person. There will be a day when I'm not here—or Pastor Heather or Pastor Patrice is not here. Being a church—being people of faith—involves being a community who individually trust in Jesus Christ and then collectively build on those experiences by living, worshiping and working faithfully together. Someone's in the hospital or alone at home—you call and visit them. Someone's feeling beaten down by racism or injustice—you walk beside them and pray with them. Someone's unsure about tomorrow—you point to the one who holds tomorrow and simply say, "Come and see." Faith has never just been about institutions. Faith is about encounters with a living God right now.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber told the story about an 18<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic rabbi named Zusha who one day gathered around his followers. He said to them that when he died and appeared before the heavenly court, they could ask him, "Why were you not as great as Abraham?" and he wouldn't be afraid; after all, he hadn't been given Abraham's intellectual gifts. They could ask him, "Why weren't you Moses?" and he wouldn't be afraid because he didn't have Moses' leadership gifts. The question that frightened him was this: "Why weren't you Zusha?" That for him, and for us, is the question of all questions.

Percival Lowell looked through a telescope and had his vision distorted by the reflection of his own eyes. For him and for us, that can lead to mistakes and projecting biases onto the world before us. We need to humbly remember what one poet has said: “We are all standing on the wrong side of choices.” At the other extreme, voices around us and in our heads may convince us that we are unworthy to be a disciple of Christ—that we are not gifted with the skills needed to reach out to others and share the faith with them, causing us to fail to be Zusha or Randy or fill in your own name.

The voices of public opinion may tell us how exciting it is to believe that there are canals on Mars and Venus, and that the talking heads on television and social media influencers are the ones you should blindly trust as you go out into the world. Nathanael had a bit of that inclination, when he sarcastically replied to Philip’s news about the Messiah coming from a backwater village never even mentioned in the Old Testament, “Really? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Similarly, the voices of self-doubt may convince us to distrust our own role in building up the church and sharing the faith—like when the woman with the flow of blood hid in the crowd and only dared touch the hem of Jesus’ robe, or the hated tax collector Zacchaeus hid in the branches of the sycamore only to be seen by Jesus and invited to host him for a meal that day.

To follow Jesus is both a literal and metaphorical act. It is literally doing acts in keeping with the example of Christ and it is orienting ourselves, our being and spirit, so that we live in alignment with a fundamental trust in God’s grace and mercy. To see Jesus is both literal and metaphorical as well. It is to see this historic figure as the incarnation of God, one who is one with the Creator, and who conquered sin and death for all humankind. It is also to “see”—to gaze upon the world through the lens of Christ, to interpret all things through faith, asking where God is in this moment and what Christ would have me say and do. Your experience of all this won’t be the same as mine or the person next to you. That is why your task is to be a Philip and keep saying to others the three little words of faith: “Come and see.”

We will all have amazing experiences in the weeks ahead. There will hopefully be sabbatical rests for all of us and times of insight about where God is leading us and this church, this nation, and this world. Remember: faith is not a noun; it’s a verb. Christ is not the one who was, but the one who is. And the invitation of Christianity is not mine or yours to dole out, but a hope and promise given by God with a wanton generosity that is illogical and amazing all at once. Come and see. Come and see what the Lord is doing. Come and see.

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Jamison, Make it Scream, Make it Burn: Essays, 2019, reviewed NYT Book Review, November 24, 2019 by Sloane Crosley.