

January 18, 2026
John 1:29-42

Epiphany 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Come and See”

“They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ [Jesus] said to them, ‘Come and see.’”

A simple invitation can change a person’s life.

As Jessie and her friends gathered at their regular table in the lunchroom, she noticed a girl standing alone at the exit to the cafeteria line with a look of confusion and fear on her face. She did not recognize the girl but sensed that she must be new to the school and unsure of where she might sit. So Jessie got up and went over to the girl; when she introduced herself, she found out that her name was Clara and that she was indeed new to the school, having moved into the community recently. Jessie welcomed her and then invited her to join Jessie and her friends at their table. When she heard Jessie’s invitation, the look on Clara’s face changed from fear and uncertainty to joy and gladness; she followed Jessie to her table and was introduced to Jessie’s tablemates, who welcomed Clara and made room for them. Because of Jessie’s invitation, Clara was no longer a stranger or an outcast; she now had a group of new friends who made her feel welcomed and included.

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When the Haddad family arrived at Pearson airport, it marked the end of an arduous ordeal that began when they were forced out of their home in Aleppo during the Syrian civil war. The family that had lived in that city for generations suddenly found themselves in a refugee camp with no idea what their future might hold. They were eventually granted asylum in Canada, and through the efforts of a group of churches in Ontario were soon on a plane to a new and unfamiliar land. They were greeted at the airport by church members who drove them to their new home in their new community, in a climate that was profoundly different and much colder than the land they left behind. While they were grateful to be in a comfortable home in a safe community, they grieved over all they had lost and did not know how they might adjust to life in this new nation. One day, there was a knock at their door, and they opened the door to find a neighbour with a warm smile and a tuna casserole. Betty introduced herself and gave the family her phone number if they needed any assistance in settling into their new home and then invited them to the

neighbourhood block party that weekend. When the day of the party came, the Haddad family arrived to find that the neighbours had actually organized a welcome party for them; such a gesture of hospitality made the family who had feared what life might be like in this new country feel that they had finally found a place where they could call home.

A simple invitation can change a person's life.

Today's Gospel lesson centers on the life-changing invitations that are extended to those who would become followers of Jesus. We are introduced in the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel to John the Baptist, who plays a critical role in all four Gospels. But whereas John is the one who baptizes Jesus at the beginning of our Lord's ministry in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), John's role in the Fourth Gospel is to be the testifier to the identity of Jesus. In the Prologue, John's role is clearly identified as to who he is and who he is not:

- “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” – John 1:6-9.

When John is confronted by the religious authorities who question the validity of his ministry, he identifies himself and his work as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: *“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”* (John 1:23; Isaiah 40:3) and proclaims that *“among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”* (1:26-27). At the beginning of today's Gospel lesson, Jesus appears for the first time in the Fourth Gospel; when John sees him, he declares, *“here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (1:29). The phrase “Lamb of God” recalls both the Passover lamb in Exodus and the servant songs of Isaiah in which the sacrifice of the lamb was for the forgiveness of sin, the brokenness of humanity that had separated people from God and from each other.

- “They shall take some of the blood [of the lamb] and put it on the doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which you eat it ... The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.” – Exodus 12:7, 13.

- “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” – Isaiah 53:7.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ crucifixion is linked to the slaughter of the paschal lamb (*“But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs”* – 19:33); the early church reinterpreted this Passover symbolism in light of the Eucharist (*“Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed”* – 1 Corinthians 5:7). John’s title for Jesus *“thus draws on a rich heritage of symbols to identify Jesus as the redeemer for the world’s sin.”* (Gail O’Day).

John continues his testimony as he identifies Jesus as *“he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me’”* (1:30), echoing the words of the Prologue in which the Evangelist states that *“John testified to him and cried out, ‘This is he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”* (1:15). John identifies his baptismal practices as belonging solely to his witness: *“I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel”* (1:31). John is not depicted as an actor in Jesus’ baptism in the Fourth Gospel; John’s only role is to allude to it, for it is God and the Holy Spirit who are the actors in the baptism of our Lord:

- “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” – 1:32-34.

John acknowledges that he did not recognize Jesus; it was when he baptized Jesus that he saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus and he recalled God’s words to him. The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus fulfilled God’s promise proclaimed by Isaiah (*“The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.”* (Isaiah 11:2). The One on whom God’s Spirit rests will bring peace and fill the people with the knowledge of the Lord because he baptizes with the Holy Spirit; after seeing the Spirit descend and remain upon Jesus, the Baptist testified to Jesus’ true reality: he is the Son of God, acknowledging Jesus’ unique relationship with God and hence his ability to reveal God in ways never before available (*“No one*

has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." – 1:18).

- "John first identifies Jesus with a traditional image, Lamb of God, but he complements that witness with the central claim of the Fourth Gospel: Jesus is the Son of God. The hope of redemption lies in recognizing Jesus as the Son of God. In many ways, then, John's witness makes the same move as the Prologue does, claiming Jesus' relationship with God as the decisive category for understanding who Jesus is." – O'Day.

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The next day begins with the same "see and say" formula that began our Gospel lesson: "*The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'*" (1:35-36). The significance of his witness is that when "*the two disciples heard him say this ... they followed Jesus*" (1:37). Their following Jesus is a direct result of John's witness, giving up a previous religious commitment as disciples of John. After his testimony, John simply disappears from the scene in the Fourth Gospel; he has performed his function in the story, and therefore the story is finished with him. While he is mentioned later in the Gospel ("*John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there, and people kept coming and were being baptized – John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison*" – 3:23-24), but John disappears from the Gospel narrative with no mention of his death: "*He has led others to Jesus, and his witness will now be replaced by his disciples' own experience of Jesus.*" (O'Day). The verb "to follow" (*akoloutheo*) operates on two levels: the physical act of following as well as a metaphor for discipleship:

- "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'" – 8:12.
- "When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." – 10:4.
- "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour." – 12:26.

When Jesus sees two of John's disciples following him, he initiates the conversation by asking them, "*what are you looking for?*" 1:38). Jesus' words convey one of the central questions of the Fourth Gospel: What do people seek when they follow Jesus? The two disciples answer Jesus with a question of their own: "'*Rabbi*' (*which translated means Teacher*), '*where are you staying?*'" Their questions work within the context of the story line – they are seeking Jesus' physical location – but the word

“stay” (*meno*) is also used in this Gospel to assert that the relationship of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is permanent (*“This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you.”* – 14:17). Jesus does not answer the disciples’ question directly, but issues an invitation that will allow them to find the answer for themselves: *“Come and see”* (1:39), an offer to see Jesus with the eyes of faith (*“I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”* – 9:39). The Evangelist reports that the disciples accepted Jesus’ invitation: *“they came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him on that day,”* entering into the divine communion into which Jesus calls his disciples (*“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love”* – 15:9).

The story of these two disciples is incomplete until their witness brings others to Jesus (*“... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth?”* – Acts 1:8). One of the two former disciples of John is identified as *“Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother”* (1:40). Andrew finds his brother and witnesses to him that *“‘we have found the Messiah’ (which is translated Anointed).”* (1:41). Andrew invites his brother to meet Jesus, and this simple invitation will change the course of Simon’s life when Jesus looks at him and says, *“‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).”* (1:42), highlighting Peter’s future role in the church as the *“rock [upon which] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”* (Matthew 16:18).

- “These stories remind the church that discipleship is an active engagement with Jesus ... One hears a variety of witnesses given by the disciples and can ponder Jesus’ invitation to ‘Come and see.’ John does not report stories about discipleship but invites the reader to share in the call to discipleship. Moreover, these stories are dominated by verbs: *follow, see, seek, stay, find*. These verbs, too, emphasize that discipleship is active and involves interacting with Jesus.” – O’Day.

Many of us have experienced the life-changing power of a simple invitation in our lives. We may have been that child who walked into a new school filled with uncertainty and fear, only to be greeted with an invitation that transformed our fear into certainty and confidence. We may have found ourselves living in a strange place due to circumstances not of our own doing, only to be welcomed by a simple invitation that helped ease our anxiety. We may even be in this assembly this morning because of a simple invitation someone once extended to us to “come and see.” My life was transformed by such an invitation when I went away to my first

year at university and sought a church that matched my home congregation, a search that was resulting in disappointment and frustration. One day, I was sitting with classmates in the dining hall sharing my fruitless search for a local congregation when one of my classmates took me aside and invited me to join him at church the next Sunday. I soon found myself in the back seat of a stranger's car traveling down unfamiliar country roads to a small town named Schwenksville; but when I walked in the door of Jerusalem Lutheran Church, I knew I had found a place where I felt welcomed. It was in this congregation that I was invited to sing in the choir, teach Sunday school, and read the Bible lessons at worship. It was also in this congregation that I met Pastor Ken Ensminger, who became one of my most important mentors and the person responsible for introducing me to seminary and the candidacy process. Without my classmate's simple invitation, I might not be here today!

As we consider the impact that these simple, life-changing invitations have had on our lives, we also are invited to consider how our Lord is inviting us to enter into partnership with our fellow Christians in all churches. On this first day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we give thanks for the *"ties that bind our hearts in Christian love,"* for the good news that *"there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."* (Ephesians 4:4-6). While our diversity and traditions help define who we are in our churches, they also provide us with strength as we share these traditions with each other as the one body of Christ that is called to work together to *"proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light."* (1 Peter 2:9). As we are invited into the body of Christ through our baptism into Christ Jesus, we are called to seek the unity that is ours in our crucified and risen Lord so that, as our Lord Jesus Christ prayed, *"the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me"* (John 17:23).

- "Unity is a divine mandate at the core of our Christian identity, more than simply an ideal. It represents the essence of the Church's calling – a call to reflect the harmonious oneness of our life in Christ amidst our diversity. This divine unity is central to our mission and is sustained by the profound love of Jesus Christ, who has set before us a unified purpose. As the Apostle Paul asserts in this letter to the Ephesians, 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling' (4:4). This Bible verse, chosen for this year, encapsulates the theological depth of Christian unity." – World Council of Churches Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2026.

A simple invitation can transform a person's life. As our lives have been transformed by these simple invitations, may we be the one who also reaches out and invites others to come into the presence of our Lord in the work we share as sisters and brothers in Christ, that all may know the love of God that binds us together as children of our Lord who calls us together as God's people who will embody Christ's love for all the world.

Amen.