Sermon: January 19, 2020 – John 1: 29-42
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Two weeks ago, we marked the festival of the Epiphany, based around Matthew’s recollections of the Magi coming to adore the Christ child.

Today, our gospel lesson fast forwards thirty years, and switches authors from Matthew to John, but many of the same story elements remain.

The Magi were well trained in matters of the Spirit. Either they were Zoroastrian priests or trained in what we would call astronomy and astrology, combining a scientific understanding of the skies with a spiritual discerning of what the constellations and planets could tell us.

The disciples, Andrew and his unnamed companion, were disciples of John the Baptist. Raised in the Jewish faith, they had a religious and personal commitment to John the Baptist and his ministry of baptism and repentance, prior to becoming disciples of Jesus.

The Magi, through their calculations and divinations and spiritual questing, knew that there was in the land of Judah a special newborn King or Messiah. When a star in the sky beckoned them, they followed it into this unknown new place.

John the Baptist had told his disciples that his goal was not to have them follow him, but to follow Jesus, the Lamb of God, the Messiah. When the Baptizer and his disciples saw Jesus, John excitedly proclaimed that this was the person he was talking about, and released his disciples to follow Jesus. And Andrew, in turn, quickly went and got his brother, Simon Peter.

Intertwined with meeting the infant Jesus, the Magi learned the truth about the powers that be. Warned in a dream of King Herod’s murderous plans for this infant rival, the Magi returned to their homeland by a different road than expected.

The disciples sent by John to follow Jesus would soon learn the truth about the political and religious powers that be that would rise in opposition to Jesus. As the Magi had learned earlier, meeting Jesus and hearing his call to life-changing love would not necessarily make life easier.

In this season of Epiphany, these later stories, such as John’s disciples meeting and following Jesus, bring us back to the awe and wonder of that first story. Jesus is now a full-grown man, rather than a baby in a manger, and the people changed by meeting him are Galilean fishermen, rather than learned visitors from afar…but the basic elements are the same: they are led to Jesus, meet him, and it changes them. They experience an epiphany, an “aha” moment, and move forward in a new direction. And if they can have such experiences, perhaps we can too. Perhaps we can meet Jesus.

“Meeting Jesus” may sound like an extraordinarily old-fashioned way of describing the spiritual journey. But nearly all Churches in the northern hemisphere – Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant – are hearing much more interest these days among younger generations, in following Jesus Christ, as opposed to “going to Church”. In my first decade of ministry, I sensed within mainline Christianity a move away from talking about Christ, focusing more on God; and with the passage of time, even that God-talk got less and less specific. The thinking was that most people could identify someplace in their lives where they experienced God (for example, while enjoying the beauty of nature); and it would set up fewer barriers if we focused on the broad idea of encountering God rather than the more Churchy idea of following Jesus. The teachings of Jesus, and his stances relative to the society around him were super-helpful in showing us how to live, but proclamations like the one we heard this morning from John the Baptist – “this [Jesus] is the Son of God” – well, that we talked about quite a bit less.

In a *United Church Observer* article from about three years ago which I can no longer put my hands on, a number of heavily-involved United Church young adults were interviewed. Some
were studying for the ministry, others were not. In talking to these young adults, the interviewer heard that what drew them to Church wasn’t the style of music or the fellowship or social justice actions or the opportunity to think in general terms about their spiritual yearnings. Those were all good things to have, but they weren’t the central thing that attracted them to a life of faith.

No, it was Jesus, pure and simple, who shaped their lives. Now, they chose the United Church rather than some other venue, because we see Jesus as fully immersed in the realities of life, and because we understand Christ’s call including social justice and broad-based inclusiveness, and perhaps because incorporating scientific knowledge and questioning our beliefs is not only allowed but encouraged; but the driver of their spirituality was Jesus: specific, tangible, risen and alive. They had “met” Jesus, and that was the game-changer.

So what does it mean to MEET Jesus? The gospel stories of the Magi and the disciples of John both imply a face to face meeting. But we’re not in a position to do that, not in the flesh at least. What does it mean, 2000 years later, to meet Jesus?

For some, meeting Jesus still feels like a very face-to-face thing: a dramatic, identifiable event when the presence, essence or calling of Jesus is real and memorable... sometimes as a vision, or an idea that comes to you from beyond yourself, or an ecstatic moment when time stands still and you emerge a changed person. Perhaps the depths of artistic connection have brought you up close to Christ: a song about Jesus, or a specific Bible narrative, a well-written academic piece, or a poem or piece of art.

In the Biblical accounts, Jesus experienced just about the worst that life can dole out, so Jesus may first become real and present to you in your hardest times: times of betrayal, times when you have hit rock bottom, times of paralyzing fear or aching grief, times when your own death is imminent. You may meet Jesus as you release an old grudge, and feel a new positive energy leading you to unfamiliar new horizons. Or you may meet Jesus as you generously, graciously serve another in Christ’s name, being truly present to them in love; Jean Vanier often spoke of this phenomenon in his work, of feeling Jesus so spiritually and physically present as he made himself vulnerable in the presence of those who live with great vulnerability.

If you grew up in a tradition where the sacraments were highly emphasized, you may feel the presence of Jesus when you receive communion. Or perhaps it’s through a healing pathway session here at the Church, either as a practitioner or as a recipient. Prayer or worship could be a regular meeting place between you—spoken prayer, silent or aloud, contemplative time focused on a Jesus scripture, phrase or image, perhaps hearing a guided meditation in which you picture yourself unpacking the events of the day with Christ.

It could be that you meet Jesus each time you touch base with your own best self, recognizing the light of Christ that burns in you and your neighbor. It could be that there was never a time that you didn’t know Jesus...or perhaps it’s not an event, but a process: a confidence, a knowledge, a connection that unfolds over time as you make room for it, opening your heart and mind and hopes to the Divine mystery who is both filled with humanity and completely beyond it.

There is no one experience, no one answer to the what or the how of meeting Jesus, but rather, a diverse collection of paths to that definitive encounter; a collection of paths as varied as the people who walk them.

One beloved guide who has helped many people in this congregation start speaking about “meeting” Jesus, was the late Lutheran scholar Marcus Borg. Marcus had such a kind, accessible way of moving people to new ways of thinking, and one of his greatest works was a little book from 1994 entitled, “Meeting Jesus again for the first time”. He introduced his title topic, with these words:
“Most of us first met [Jesus] when we were children. This is most obviously true for those of us raised in the church, but also for anybody who grew up in Western culture. We all received some impression of Jesus, some image of him, however vague or specific.

“For many, the childhood image of Jesus remains intact into adulthood… [but] for many [other] Christians, especially in mainline churches, there came a time when their childhood image of Jesus no longer made a great deal of sense. And for many of them, no persuasive alternative has replaced it…. For them, meeting Jesus again will be – as it has been for me – like meeting him for the first time.” (p.5)

Marcus then detailed his own journey with Jesus: from a very devout, stringent upbringing in which Jesus died to pay the price for the sins of little Marcus and everyone else. This came to be replaced by a time of spiritual anxiety and disaffection in his adolescent years, which eventually subsided, and then it was off to College with what he called “a conventional but no longer deeply held understanding of the Christian faith.” (p.7)

“Until my later thirties” he wrote (p.17), “I saw the Christian life as being primarily about believing…. Like many, I struggled with doubt and disbelief… I continued to think that believing was what the Christian life was all about yet no matter how hard I tried I was unable to ‘do’ that, and I wondered how others could.” Focusing on conceptual statements of belief, rather than a robust balance of action and reflection with the Divine, had created a problem.

“Now” he wrote, some twenty years later “[I have come to realize that] the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit.” This involves a connection with both the “pre-Easter Jesus” – the actual person of Jesus, whose interactions with others were clearly memorable and transformative – and the “post-Easter Jesus” – the Christ who continues to shape people’s lives in such complex ways. (see p.11) The process of “meeting Jesus again” was, for Marcus Borg, a process unfolding over many decades, and he emerged with an active, thoughtful relationship with one who was completely spiritually aware and awake, a holy companion who continues to walk with us as we seek to embody his courageous, compassionate love, an expression of human traditions shaped by the Divine.

To an extent, what Marcus Borg described was not far different from what the Magi, and the disciples of John, experienced when they met Jesus. Already spiritually committed, they came to Jesus, and that changed the way they saw the world, and the roads they would travel next.

And what about for you? When and where has Jesus been most real and present to you? Or would you describe your experiences of the Divine, and the life-shaping power of love, in a different way? Or are you still seeking that first breakthrough? However you would articulate your connection to the foundational presence of love, these weeks after Epiphany invite us to open ourselves to the Spirit in new ways – to meet Jesus again, as if for the first time…or to appreciate how the words and actions of Jesus have inspired and shaped the person you are…or to embark on a new, intentional quest of learning, or contemplation, or social engagement, that brings you closer to Jesus. We honour this age-old process of coming, and encountering, and being shown new ways, as we live our lives with curiosity, and gratitude, and wonder. In this day and all your days, may the companionship of Christ Jesus be known and welcomed and shared. Amen.

References cited:
© 2020 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.
Based on John 1: 29-42a. https://stmarksheboygan.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Sermon-01-19-2020.mp3. Home / Sermon: January 19, 2020. Main Worship Services. Thursdays (No services at this time) Sundays at 9:00AM *. John 1:19-51 occurs over four consecutive days. During the first two days and the beginning of the third day, John gives his testimony; the detail of which parallels the pattern set forth in verses 6-8. On day one John declares he is not the light (verses 19-28), on day two he witnesses positively to the light (verses 29-34), and on day three people begin to believe through him (verses 35-36). As the day progresses, the two disciples John points on are welcomed by Jesus and bring Simon Peter in (verses 35-42). In their excitement, they all address Jesus with a variety of titles.Â Commentary on John 1:29-42. The bridge from the prologue to the action of Johnâ€™s Gospel is manifested in the human witness sent from God named John. First Reading. Childrenâ€™s Sermon for John 1:29-42. January 19, 2020, Lectionary Year A, 1-19-20. Jesus Is A Teacher We Can Follow.Â John then tells the people that Jesus will baptize with God's Holy Spirit. Then, after all that telling, we hear that John sends two of his own disciples to meet Jesus. But once those two disciples start asking Jesus questions, Jesus' response is to, "Come and see." So the two disciples leave John and follow Jesus. SHARE the Good News (a.k.a. The Destination). Today's story reminds us that other people can tell us about Jesus, but the best way to learn about Jesus is to follow him and see what he did. John 1:29-42 (NIV) John Testifies About Jesus and Johnâ€™s Disciples Follow Jesus. 29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, â€œLook, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is the one I meant when I said, â€œA man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.â€™ 31 I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.â€œ 32 Then John gave this testimony: â€œI saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.Â January 16, 2020 at 12:22 am. Kristen has a great gift for story telling. Her enthusiasm is catchy in addition to the way she simplifies each lesson so that children can relate to the subject.