

Come and see: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Cor. 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

I am often at a loss for words when people ask me what I think. To me, thinking—making clear and linear progress through my mental swamp—is drudgery that I perform only when it is necessary. But if someone says, “Tell me a story,” I am in my element. Psalm 40 tells a familiar story: “I waited for the Lord, and he heard me; he drew me up from the desolate pit and put a new song in my mouth; he gave me an open ear and a mouth to praise.” And while my response to this gift is never what it should be, I am often able to fulfill a part of it, telling the glad news of deliverance “in the great congregation” and not hiding it away in my heart. As a writer I have devoted my life to fulfilling the storyteller’s vocation.

It can help to take a nonlinear approach to this Gospel, as stories are being told in a way that doesn’t make much sense. In describing the baptism of Jesus, John the Baptist defines the dove that descends from heaven as the Holy Spirit. He then declares to his disciples—twice, in case they don’t get it the first time—that Jesus is the Lamb of God. And then two disciples of John do get it and immediately begin to follow Jesus. We jump from one scene to another, as in a movie, and the first recorded conversation between Jesus and his new disciples seems more appropriate for a Wes Anderson film than for sacred scripture: “What are you looking for?” “Teacher, where are you staying?” “Come and see.” It feels less than illuminating.

But if we stay with the strangeness for a while, we find in this peculiar exchange a key to understanding what faith entails. It is not so much a matter of thinking as doing—and not doing so much as being and witnessing. Just come and see, and we might realize that Jesus came to make us both more holy and more fully human. Just come and see, and we can comprehend the life and ministry of Jesus as the very center of our own faith. Of course, this puts pressure on us as Christians to live a life worthy of the name. If we were asked where we “stay,” to define where it is we make our stand, what witness would our life make? Would we look like everyone else in the rat race, distracted and disaffected, prone to resentment and ready to stick derogatory labels on those who do not act, think or worship as we do? Or would we remember, as Paul reminds the contentious Corinthians, that we are called to be

saints? Would we respond to this call in a self-aggrandizing way, certain that God loves us more than other people? Or would we respond by shutting down our egocentricity and opening our ears?

Last July I attended an interfaith conference at St. John's Abbey in Minnesota. The speakers were monastics from the Christian and Zen Buddhist traditions, as well as an Islamic scholar, who seemed impressed with the hospitality of her Benedictine hosts. Instead of the hostile questioning she often receives in America these days, she was simply asked to share her story. What had she seen in Islam that attracted her? She had been raised as a Christian, as had the Buddhists, but had begun to explore Islam as a graduate student in Paris. Her endeavor began not so much as an intellectual pursuit as a response to what she witnessed in the lives of the Africans who were her fellow students. Appalled at the daily insult and discrimination they received as blacks and as Muslims, she was astonished at their ability to endure such persecution with dignity and without bitterness. They attributed their perseverance under pressure to their Muslim faith, and that caused her to take a closer look. To go and see.

Another speaker was a French Benedictine who reported on the longstanding exchange program that French monastics have had with Japanese Zen Buddhists. (American monastics have a similar exchange with Tibetan Buddhists.) He said that after the Buddhist had been in the monastery for about a month, he had only one question. It seemed to him that the monks did not live very well. They worked hard, their food was neither good nor plentiful, and they did not get enough sleep. "Yet they are joyful," he said, "and I want to know: from where does this joy come?" Come and see.

When we come to John's Gospel we find it opening, like the book of Genesis, with the words, "In the beginning," and while John seems more a theologian than a storyteller, his narrative races along, and at every turn someone receives a new name. John calls Jesus the Lamb of God, while the disciples name him Rabbi or Teacher, but soon are calling him something more: Messiah, the Anointed One. Jesus returns the favor, declaring that Simon is now to be known as Cephas, or Peter. As any Native American could tell you, naming ceremonies are important. They signify a new creation, in this case the church, full of those flawed people who will bear the name of Christian. Isaiah has told us: listen, pay attention. And the psalmist asks: did you ever find the strength to sing a new song when you were in the pit? Or perhaps you were standing on the banks of a muddy rivulet and discovered there

the river of life. How is this possible? What has come into the world so that it can happen? It is not answers that matter here, but the invitation that we can only hope we have the grace to hear: come and see.