Come and See
(John 1:29-42)

As a young child, before the age of eight, I was a preacher's kid among the more conservative cousins of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Independent Christian Church. My dad had gone through seminary and was the full-time pastor at a small congregation in Chillicothe, Illinois. As I've mentioned before, the church itself was located in the basement of the parsonage. So we literally lived on top of the church.

So much of my early childhood is formed by the rhythms of congregational life. Christmas and Easter, obviously. But also the more mundane parts of church life—potlucks, congregational camping trips in the spring, and Vacation Bible School in the summer.

One of the significant events every year in our small congregation was the big revival, complete with a canvas tent, thick, scratchy jute rope, and wooden stakes that looked like they came off the set of Dracula. Somebody—I don't remember who—would come

in and put up this colossal circus tent in the field, on the other side of the gravel parking lot bounded by treated railroad ties, just under my bedroom window.

The week-long revival, which I always found exciting—lots of people and activity. And I was the scion of the local preacher. Heck, I was the only kid in my grade school who hosted their very own Jesus carnival every year.

One of the parts I liked best was that we'd have company. The visiting preacher would stay with us. Usually, these were friends of my father who'd gone to seminary with him. And they all seemed so interesting and fun. I remember my dad laughing a lot, which was noticeable since my dad didn't laugh very much around us (not, I think, because he was unhappy with his family, but because I suppose he didn't find us all that funny). But when those guys would show up (because it was always "guys"), my dad became just a regular dude in his late twenties—all the reminiscing and jokes. I loved that time as much because of the

life it brought to my dad's eyes as for the novelty it brought to my rather predictable small-town life.

Which is why I was confused when these same otherwise fun-loving young fellas, who at supper had just told goofy jokes and laughed and carried on, would then go outside to the revival, stand up under the strands of hanging lightbulbs strung between the tent poles, and start howling about how we were going to hell if we didn't hurry up and get baptized. The whole thing was so ***strange*** to my young mind. These guys, whose company I thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the time, suddenly sounded like raging lunatics to me, who'd recently been bitten by a rabid bat.

I didn't get it. The rest of the year, I heard about God's love for us all, the matchless grace that seeks us out and refuses to let us go, no matter who we were or what we'd done. But then, once a year, I was introduced to a different God, one who—it sounded like—would take a great deal of pleasure in watching me suffer and fail.

Why?

Because then this spiteful God would get to punish me for all eternity.

I was a kid whose parents didn't scream. Once in a while, we'd do some stupid kid thing and get in trouble—but even when they were angry, it always seemed like my parents were in control. And that's how my dad preached. I don't remember him ever raising his voice and pounding the pulpit. Instead, his preaching tended to be much calmer and more persuasive. My dad liked to teach, and his sermons were the vehicle for his most extended lessons.

And it wasn't that my dad didn't believe in hell or God's judgment. On the contrary, I think he didn't trust the emotional frenzy whipped up by the revival preachers. He was a rational

thinker, a good old-fashioned, logic-chopping Campbellite through and through.

So, I asked my dad about it one time after a particularly rousing revivalist homily about our inevitable one-way ticket to perdition: “Dad, why are they so angry?”

My dad said, “Well, they’re concerned. They want everybody to find the love of God.”

“They sure don’t sound like they care about love at all,” I said.

He cocked his head and raised his eyebrows as if to concede the point.

“But you don’t preach like that. How come?”

He said something that’s stuck with me: “You can’t force people to love God. Nobody ever fell in love because they got their arm

twisted. If you manipulate people into following Jesus, then it's not really Jesus they're following because Jesus cares about healing people, not torturing them."

"But if that's true, why do you have these preachers at our church then?"

In retrospect, I realize that was a sharp question that would have been difficult to explain to a six-year-old. He stumbled through some answer, which apparently didn't satisfy my curiosity. So he said, "Well, some people think something's ***wrong*** with their faith, that God doesn't love them if they don't walk around feeling guilty all the time. These preachers just want to make sure as many people love God as possible."

"They sure have a funny way of showing it."

He nodded his head. "Indeed."

We never had another revival after that. It would be claiming too much to say that my questions were the reason for that, but the reality is that my dad left the ministry shortly after that to go into publishing—which had more to do with his being a world-class introvert than anything ***I*** might say about the emotional blackmail of tent revivals.

I will note, however, that after my dad left the ministry when I was seven, we never even ***went*** to another revival.

Have you ever wondered about that? If God is so great, why do we have to manipulate and coerce people into loving Jesus?

I had a professor—interestingly enough, one of my dad's roommates when my dad traveled by train to seminary for classes for the week—who agreed with my dad on the whole revivalist "turn-or-burn" thing. He used to tell us, "You need to be careful what you preach. Because what you win them with is what you win them to. If people come to Jesus because they've had the hell

scared out of them, they'll believe God is manipulative and violent. But God is neither."

I'm not a psychotherapist. I didn't even stay in a Holiday Inn Express. But I guess some people need to feel like God only makes sense if God's a strong parent who's not only ***willing*** to punish the kids but ***enthusiastic*** about it … because those people believe that such violently manipulative language is how parents show love.

Early on in, I ministered in a couple of congregations where people felt this way … hard … really hard. They'd meet me in greeting the line after worship and say, "Preacher, that was a good sermon … but I need a little more heat. It doesn't feel like I've been at church if the preacher doesn't step on my toes."

I was shocked by that. I mean, I hate feeling guilty … like I'm constantly struggling with someone whose apparent mission in

life is to find newer and ever more creative ways to be disappointed in me. Who needs that?

I don't want to psychoanalyze anybody, but … I mean … come on. Why would ***anyone*** want to follow a God who has more in common with an over-eager hall monitor/disapproving librarian than the God who created us in God's own image and refuses to rest until we're all able to enjoy a world filled with equity, justice, and the abundance God's desired for us all along?

The scriptures present any number of images of God—God the Lion of Judah, the watchful shepherd, the heartbroken lover, the vigilant protector, the loving parent who expects more from us than we're often willing to give, the vulnerable shepherd who places God's life in our hands. So why focus all your energy on a God who seems perpetually aggrieved, who prefers manipulation to attraction, whose greatest desire seems to be to set down impossible expectations in the hope that nobody will meet them

so God can finally do what God, according to them, has wanted to do all along? Lower the boom and send us all to hell.

And if that's the God you serve, isn't that the example you imitate? If you believe that a bitter, resentful, and suspicious God is the image in which you were created, is it any wonder when you turn out to be bitter, resentful, and suspicious of everyone else who doesn't meet ***your*** standards?

In a world like that, your most important job is to make sure everyone else knows how annoyed God is with them so that, by some chance, they'll shape up and avoid the fires of hell.

Have you ever felt that way? That faith, like medicine, has to taste awful to be effective?

Every time this brand of faith dominates, people wind up dead and persecuted in the name of love. That's how we got the Inquisition, witch burnings, and the Moral Majority.

From a casual reading of history, it soon becomes clear that there are always a sufficient number of people who claim to love Jesus and the God he embodies and who are so afraid of that God that even coercion and manipulation are acceptable … if it saves some sinner from the hands of an angry God.

All of which is why I find this passage in our Gospel this morning so comforting … and so counter-intuitive. John the Baptist has obviously heard about this Jesus guy. He says that he saw the Spirit of God descend on Jesus at his baptism, looking like … a what?

An avenging angel bent on showing everybody just how displeased God is?

No. John says he saw the Spirit of God descending on Jesus … like a dove. "This Jesus," he tells everyone, "is the Son of God." In

other words, “I feel pretty sure ***this*** is the guy we’ve been waiting for.”

The next day, John’s standing about with two of his disciples—one of whom we learn is Andrew, whose rowdy brother is Simon Peter. They’re apparently just hanging around, talking about the vagaries of the fishing industry, how inflation has made every trip to Kroger feel like an economic adventure, or how the world is going to end in a fiery apocalypse.

Who knows? But in the middle of it all, Jesus happens by. And John the Baptist says to his two followers, “That’s the guy!”

They knit their eyebrows: “The guy?”

John sighs in a show of exasperation. “The guy I’ve been talking about. You know, the Lamb of God? Ringing any bells?”

And just as soon as he says this, according to the text, John's two devoted followers peel away and start following Jesus.

It soon becomes obvious that they're curious about this guy their boss has been talking up.

Andrew and the other disciple hang around the edges, trying to figure out if what John has said about this guy is true. Is Jesus ***really*** the Lamb of God, the one who's come to set things right for God's people?

Jesus notices them on the fringes and says, "What are you looking for?"

But this isn't the same "what-are-you-looking-for?" as the lady at Rainbow Blossom asks when you come in on a mission to find soy-based flank steaks. The word Jesus uses in our text has to do more with quests for the meaning of life: "What is it of ultimate value in this life that you're searching for?"

And so they say, “Rabbi, where are you staying?”

Again, this question isn’t what your friends ask you at the bar after the main program at the convention. This is a question that can’t be answered by offering the name of the chain that holds your hotel loyalty rewards points. This is another question with cosmic implications—“Where do you abide? Where are you located in this world in relationship to the ultimate quest to find God?”

Now, here’s where a more insecure preacher would have said, “You’re going to question me? I’m the Lamb of God, for crying out loud! ***I*** do the questioning around here. And the reality of this situation, of ***your*** situation, is this: “Either jump on the Jesus Express or find yourself riding the Red Line train to eternal punishment. On or off. It’s your choice.”

No. What does Jesus say?

Does he try to try to scare them into joining up? Does he threaten or manipulate? Do you get the feeling that when Andrew and the other disciple show up, Jesus sees them as potential projects who need to be tricked into giving up their fun-filled lives as fishermen in favor of a future filled with suffering and sacrifice, whose biggest need is staying one step ahead of Ol' Scratch?

All he says is, "Come and See. I'm not trying to sell you anything. I'm not here to fill my quota of converts. I'm here to announce the coming of a new realm in which everyone has enough, and justice walks the land arm-in-arm with peace."

That's all. No specially constructed campaign to turn people into sales figures. No, "Hurry! Supplies are limited!"

No "turn or burn."

No "you'd better get fire insurance."

No “if you died tonight, where would you spend eternity?”

Just, “Come and see. I feel confident enough about the life I’m offering that I don’t need to figure out how to sell people on it or scare them into buying it. The life I represent so obviously exceeds the impoverished life on offer from this present realm that all I care about is giving people a chance to catch a glimpse of it.”

How do they respond?

The text says that Andrew and Simon “came and saw where Jesus was staying, and they remained with him that day.”

And we who’ve been given the job of modeling this new life, of offering a vision of the new reality Jesus opens up, of spreading the good news of the world God is busy creating—we demonstrate the confidence we have in this new life, so much so

that our responsibility becomes not tricking people or browbeating them into submission … but merely, whispering, “If you want to know, come and see how we live.”

—Amen.