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Epiphany 2, Year
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Come and See

During our newcomer coffees, I'll ask visitors how they found out about Ascension. Our visitor cards ask the same question. While I don't have exact statistics (a surprise for a numbers person like me), I can confidently say that an overwhelming majority give the same answer, *I was invited.*

In other words, someone said, "Come and see."

Some of you were invited by a friend. Others may have found us by googling "Episcopal Church in Vestavia Hills." Some passed by this building countless times on the way to work, the grocery store, or school. However you arrived here, I'm glad you decided to come and see.

Those words, *come and see*, echo through today's Gospel reading. If you were here last Sunday, you might be thinking, "Didn't we already hear about Jesus' baptism?" You're not wrong, but you're not completely right either. Last week we heard Matthew's account. Today we hear John's.

Notice the differences. In John's Gospel, the focus isn't on the act of baptism itself. There is no description of Jesus entering the water. There's no evidence of John the Baptist even performing the baptism. There is no voice from heaven declaring, "This is my beloved Son."

Instead, we hear another voice. We hear the voice of John the Baptist, who points away from himself and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

To understand what John is saying, we have to pay attention to the grammar.

John doesn't say *sins* - plural, a list of misdeeds. Sins are outward manifestations of sin - singular. John says, the Lamb takes away the *sin* (singular) of the world.

Sin is not just what we do, or don't do, but an underlying human condition that distorts how we think and act.

In John's Gospel, sin is less about doing the wrong things and more about trusting the wrong things. From the very beginning, this is how sin works.

In the Garden of Eden, the fundamental problem isn't that Adam and Eve break a rule. Breaking a rule comes later. The deeper issue is that they trust the wrong voice. They begin to doubt God's goodness and listen instead to a voice that sounds reasonable, even faithful, but ultimately one that leads them astray.

That's what we noticed in our *Who's Who of the Bible* class when we looked more closely at the serpent.

The serpent is dangerous not because he tells obvious lies, but because he speaks in half-truths. It's easy to spot a blatant lie. It's much harder to recognize a half-truth that tempts us to second-guess the promises of God.

You might say original sin is trusting the wrong voices - voices of fear, power, or false promises about what will save us. There are always many voices competing for our trust. Some promise safety. Some promise success. Some promise that they alone can save us.

And once trust has been hijacked by the wrong voices, people don't just need better information. What we need is liberation - our eyes and ears opened so we can see and hear what is true and what is a lie.

That's why John turns to the story of Passover, in order to show us what it means to call Jesus the Lamb of God and what he comes to set us free from.

The Passover story begins with a lie Pharaoh tells - that God's people are less than. Less worthy. Less human. Less deserving of freedom. That they exist to serve someone else's purposes.

Versions of that lie still exist today. You are not enough, you don't belong, you are only as valuable as what you produce or how well you measure up.

The Passover lamb is about liberation from that lie. The lamb's blood was a sign of protection and deliverance as God's people were freed from slavery. It marked freedom from the lie that this was as good as life could get.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is that Lamb. The Lamb of God doesn't promise that suffering and pain will disappear from our lives. Instead, he promises that sin and death no longer have the final word. Their power has been broken.

We will stumble. We will struggle. We will sin. But fear and failure no longer get to decide who we are or where we're going, a truth we hear echoed in our own baptisms.

John doesn't stop with the image of the Lamb. Later in the Gospel, Jesus will describe himself as a shepherd - one whose voice the sheep come to recognize over time.

In a world full of competing voices, voices that try to tell us who we are and where we belong, the sheep aren't saved by more information. They're saved by learning which voice they can trust.

As I talked about last week, that voice doesn't say, *prove yourself*. It says, *you belong*.

Even when the world tries to tell you that you're out, that you don't measure up, that you've failed too badly or wandered too far - that voice keeps calling.

That's the context in which Jesus turns to the first disciples and asks, "What are you looking for?" Jesus doesn't ask what they believe or whether they understand who he is. He asks what they are seeking - what they hope will give their lives meaning, what they hope will sustain them in this world.

The disciples take a page out of Jesus' book and answer a question with a question. "Where are you staying?" they ask.

They aren't asking what road he lives on. The word, *staying*, means abiding. They're basically asking whether there is room in his life for them. They're wondering if they can trust him.

Instead of saying, "Of course, you can trust me." He invites them to see for themselves and says, "Come and see."

He knows that trust doesn't happen on command, especially for people who have been disappointed, hurt, or burned before. So instead of forcing clarity, he offers space wonder. And in that space, trust can grow.

One of the gifts of the Episcopal Church is that we take a similar posture. Years ago, in the time before the internet, the Episcopal Church ran an ad campaign with a poster that read, "Welcome to the Episcopal Church, where you don't have to check your brain at the door."

Inspired by the late comedian and Episcopalian Robin Williams, that phrase wasn't about having the "right" answers, but about freedom - freedom to explore, to question, to think, to stay curious, to come and see.

Our tradition doesn't begin by telling people exactly what they must believe. Instead, we invite people to experience God through Scripture, through prayer, through questions, and through a life shared with others - trusting that belief will deepen over time through relationship with God that is fostered within the context of a faith community.

That's why our theology is shaped less by a single statement of doctrine and more by our common prayer. Doctrine matters, but in our tradition, doctrine flows from prayer, not the other way around. Prayer is how we talk to God. Doctrine is how we talk about God. And when prayer comes first, faith becomes something we grow into, not something we have to figure out in an eight-week class.

Jesus' invitation causes a chain reaction of invitations. One person encounters Jesus and then brings another. Andrew brings his brother Simon. Philip finds Nathanael. Nathanael

hesitates, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” And Peter, well, Peter does what Peter always does. He goes all in before fully understanding what he’s getting himself into.

Faith doesn’t begin with certainty. It begins with an invitation to come and see.

Over time, the disciples learn whether they can trust the one who keeps inviting them to stay. And discipleship doesn’t make their lives easier, but it does make their lives fuller.

As the Gospel of John unfolds, we see what it means to follow Jesus, not by finding all the answers, but by learning how to see the world and one another differently. To see the world in the light of Christ.

Most people are here because someone extended a simple invitation. Someone said, *Come and see.*

So, who invited you to come and see? And who might you be called to invite with those same words?

Jesus calls each of us differently, and each of us responds differently. Some of us dive headfirst into the deep end. Some of us loiter a bit. Some of us ask questions.

All of us are invited. Amen.