

Epiphany 2
 St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA
 Parish Meeting Sunday

January 17, 2021
 Rev. Paul Moore

"Come and see...I saw..."

My childhood friend, Randy Borman, used to run eco-tours in the Amazon jungle where he was born and raised. He had some tourists in his thatch-roofed shack in the Cofan village where he lived when one of them saw an enormous fishing hook hanging on the wall. "Wow, that's a big fishhook," the person exclaimed.

Always one to capitalize on the exotic, Randy replied, "Wait until you see our earthworms." Sure enough, the next day, on a walk in the jungle, they came across one of the giant earthworms of South America. They can be 3 feet long and an inch and a half thick.

They took it home and loaded up the hook. Randy quipped, "Wait until you see our catfish!" Unfortunately, they failed to catch one of the giant catfish. Flathead catfish in the Mississippi can grow to enormous sizes, and the same happens in any large river. I weighed one that had been cleaned that weighed 161 lbs., and it was big, but everyone knew there were bigger ones out there.

The whole eco-tourism thing hinges on "come and see." Come and see for yourself the wonders of the Amazon jungle, the Arctic, the Cascades, the Temperate Rainforest of the Ho River. Come and see, then go and say, "I saw,..." Then go live in a way that helps to slow its destruction. There is power in the personal encounter.

The Gospel of John is about light and darkness, seeing and blindness. Throughout the book, those who follow Jesus learn to see and those who do not choose blindness. It is fitting that the first disciple is called in the context of seeing. Jesus says to Philip, "Follow me," and Philip sees who Jesus is.

So, he goes and finds his friend from another town, Nathanael and says, "We have found the Messiah."

Nathanael responds as one who has not yet seen. "Can anything good come out of Galilee?" (*We know the place. They are all country hicks there, rednecks, not really Jewish like in Jerusalem to the south, and not really Greek like in Syria to the north. Neither fish nor fowl. How can something good come out of such a place?*) He does not see, he categorizes. He relies on stereotypes and prejudices to do his thinking.

Philip doesn't fight it. He just says, "Come and see." (*You think our fishhooks are big, you should see our worms.*) If you think my story is big, you should meet the man yourself.

So, Nathanael does. When he meets Jesus, Jesus takes the initiative. "Here is an Israelite in whom there is no guile." Clearly, Jesus has no condemnation for Nathanael's easy default to stereotype—after all, what else does he know? His heart is in the right place, he hides no agendas.

Nathanael accepts the accolade. "How do you know me?"

And Jesus says, "I saw you under the fig tree." The fig tree in the Jewish mind of the day was a symbol for home, one's place of origin, one's place of nurture and comfort. It's as if he is saying, *I know you for who you are.* Then, those powerful words, "I saw you...." To truly see someone, to notice them, to acknowledge them, to let them know that in your world there is space for them, is to honor them with human dignity and respect, to acknowledge the divine spark of the image of God in them.

Nathanael is overcome. His response is one of devotion and faith. Oh, he won't truly understand for 3 more years, but in the end he will.

Jesus continues. (*You should see what's coming.*) "You will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Remember another time when angels ascend and descend? It's when Jacob is running from his brother Esau for having stolen his birthright. He has a dream of a ladder. Most authorities agree that this line of Jesus' is an allusion to that story. What did Jacob say in the morning after his dream? "I will call this place 'Beth-el,' (*House of God,*) for God was surely here and I did not know it." (*You think that was amazing, Nathanael? Follow me and you will find yourself in the house of God. Beth-el will be wherever you and I are.*)

We call ourselves a House of God. If our place, here in the church, has been hallowed by the prayers and praises of people gathered over the decades, it is no less holy because for these short months we cannot gather. It is the house of God. But if you think that's amazing, consider this. It is the house of God because you are the people of God. Where two or three are gathered in his name, he is here among us, and we become Beth-el, the House of God. St. Paul calls each one of us a precious stone in the construction of a living temple to the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

We frame that idea in our mission statement with which we open services every Sunday.

We believe that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration.

We are being caught up in God's great work of making the world Beth-el.

Now, we can't do it all, but we can do what we are good at. Several weeks ago, Karisse and I had the privilege of spending the night at a church in Sedro Woolly with Family Promise. As far as nights go, it was rather uneventful, which is good! But in another sense, it was rather remarkable. We share in helping people find their feet after they have found themselves plunged into homelessness. Homelessness is an enormous problem in this county, in this state and in this country. Here we are, one of the richest nations in the world, and we have over a half million people in the US who are homeless. We at St. Paul's are doing something about it, because we came and saw what God is doing in the world, and we are following Jesus.

The other day I was talking with Baudelina and Francisco about when Resurrección might open for in-person services. We bounced it off the Bishop, who asked if Resurrección and St. Paul's were the same congregation or not, because if not, there would have to be another plan prepared and submitted. It made me think again about just what this relationship is. We are two congregations, of different cultures and languages, who have figured out that we need one another for the gifts each one brings to the table. Do you think that is amazing? Multicultural ministry is usually thought of as ministry to or ministry for, but rarely ministry with. We are doing something amazing.

If you think those two things blow your mind, there are plenty of other examples. We will be rolling out two more in our parish meeting after this service ends. Spoiler alert—I'm not going to tell you. You have to attend the meeting.

“Come and see...I saw...” The power of encounter, a vital, human, spiritual encounter, where Jesus is discovered God's Beloved Community, and we find ourselves in the house of God. This is the healing and transformation of the world.