

We've been reading through the Gospel of John for the past couple of months as part of our Parish Reading Project for Lent. When we began John in February, I'm sure none of us would guess that we would be entering Easter with social distancing and a suspension of public worship. And yet, here we are.

It's a reminder that we don't always know how life will play out. Events sometimes happen that surprise us, and cause us to react, to respond in new ways. Sometimes we react more quickly. But sometimes it takes us awhile.

And we have seen that theme playing out in countless ways in the Gospel of John.

Now, John has let us his readers know the full story from the get-go. The prologue in chapter 1 tells us that Jesus is unique. He is God's Word, the way God gets things done in the world. In Jesus, the Word becomes flesh, God becomes one of us. He lives among us, in our midst.

What's more, Jesus is uniquely able to tell us what God is like. No one can see the Father, John tells us. But when you look at Jesus, the Son, you are able to see who and what God is. In John's words, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."¹

But in that same prologue, John also foreshadows the kind of reception the Son will get. Some will reject him. And some will accept him. In John's words, "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."²

And in the rest of the Gospel, we see these themes playing out. Many people will oppose and reject Jesus. But many will also believe in him.

But one of the things I love about John is how a number of human reactions to Jesus are showcased, especially when it comes to the believers, the followers of Jesus.

In John, they are shown with a wide spectrum of individuality, ESPECIALLY in the ways they respond to Jesus.

I just want to do a quick run-through of some of these individuals we've met in John.

At the end of chapter 1, Jesus gathers three disciples on day 2 of his ministry, and two more on day 3.

Two of these three on day 2 are Simon Peter, and the unnamed disciple whom we traditionally assume is John. Note this. They are there on the ground floor of Christianity. Peter and John are two of the three original disciples.

¹ John 1:18

² John 1:12

And they will be with Jesus for at least 2 or 3 years, learning from him, hanging out with him, hearing him teach and preach, watching him heal people and raise people from death.

And yet, they won't fully understand who he is until chapter 20, in John's case, and chapter 21 in Peter's case. That's the last two chapters of the Gospel. They're there with Jesus from the very first chapter of the Gospel. But they won't fully know who he is until the last chapters of the Gospel. And I'll say more about both of them in a moment.

The next follower we're introduced to is Nicodemus in chapter 3. Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, are the two followers in John that are of high socio-economic status. Nicodemus is a well-trained Rabbi and a member of the ruling council. But he comes to Jesus by night, which says that he is intrigued by Jesus and wants to learn more. But he's also still "in the dark" spiritually. And he's sneaking around privately, not wanting to be seen publicly as a follower of Jesus. And in his conversation with Jesus in chapter 3, he shows that he's still "in the dark" spiritually—he still has a way to go.

He does pop up two more times. In chapter 7 Nicodemus speaks up briefly in a council meeting, mildly defending Jesus. But when he faces quick opposition, he's like a turtle pulling his head back into his shell.³ But at least that's something.

And in chapter 19, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea will out themselves as followers by publicly asking Governor Pontius Pilates' permission to take custody of Jesus' corpse so they can bury it in Joseph's tomb.⁴ So, with Nicodemus, we see a slow progression over a couple of years. He moves forward spiritually just a bit.

By contrast, in chapter 4 we see someone who believes in Jesus rather quickly. Jesus has a long conversation with an outcast, a Samaritan woman. But she ends up going back to her village, telling her people that she thinks Jesus may be the Messiah, the Christ, God's chosen one.⁵ And she brings them out, and Jesus stays and teaches them for 2 days. And at the end, they believe that she is right, that Jesus is God's anointed.⁶

The Samaritan woman and the people of her village go further than Nicodemus. Nicodemus becomes a follower eventually. These Samaritans become followers almost immediately.

Plus, the Samaritan woman is the first person in John's Gospel to profess faith in Jesus. There will be others later in John who will profess faith at even deeper levels. But she is the first one. And she brings her people to acknowledge Jesus as their savior, and the savior of the world.

³ John 7:50-52

⁴ John 19:38-42

⁵ John 4:29

⁶ John 4:42

We're seeing a pattern here. In John, one size doesn't fit all. Yes, John wants us all to believe in Jesus. It takes Nicodemus almost 2 years to do it. The Samaritans respond within 2 days.

Then we have two men who are healed in chapter 5 and chapter 9. The lame man in chapter 5 ends up not being a follower of Jesus. Even being healed is apparently not enough for him to take the risk of following Jesus in the face of public opposition.

But the blind man in chapter 9 is very different. He is healed. And when he's questioned about it, he keeps defending Jesus against public opposition, even though this formerly blind man is not quite sure yet who Jesus is. He defends Jesus during several rounds of pretty tough interrogation. And at the end, he meets Jesus again. And he professes faith in Jesus. "Lord I believe," he says, and he is the first person in John's Gospel to bow down and worship Jesus.⁷

In chapter 11 we see good friends of Jesus: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany. When brother Lazarus dies, and Jesus arrives 4 days too late to save him, Martha is angry with Jesus. She has known Jesus for a while as a friend. But when push comes to shove, and Jesus asks her if she believes in him, believes that he is the Resurrection and the Life, Martha is able to respond, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."⁸

And these past 2 weeks we've been reading John's accounts of Holy Week and Easter.

The Beloved Disciple, traditionally John, has followed Jesus for 2 years, since day 2 of Jesus' ministry. He is next to Jesus at the Last Supper. He is at the High Priest's house during Jesus' trial. He stands at the foot of the cross. And Jesus even entrusts the care of his mother to this disciple.

That's a very close, intimate, long-term relationship between teacher and disciple. But even with ALL of that, this disciple still is "in the dark" about who Jesus really is. As I said last week, he doesn't fully get it until he looks inside the empty tomb on Easter morning.⁹ Only then, does the light come on. Only then does he fully understand.

The other disciples don't get it until that evening. As we read today, Jesus appears to them on the evening of Easter day. And only then to they begin to understand the Good News of who Jesus truly is.

Thomas takes a week longer. We also read about him in our Gospel today. And yet he is able to make the most complete profession of faith in John's Gospel, calling him, "My Lord and my God!"¹⁰

⁷ John 9:38

⁸ John 11:27

⁹ John 20:8

¹⁰ John 20:28

And then there's Peter. Peter was also with Jesus from day 2 of his ministry. But Peter had messed up. He had tried to save himself by publicly denying Jesus 3 times. But in the very last chapter of John, Peter is given 3 chances to affirm his love for Jesus. And Peter does so.

In Peter's case, he had been with Jesus from the beginning. He had promised to stick with him. He said he was ready to die with Jesus, but a few hours later, he denied him. When push came to shove, he caved. He went backwards. Yet, he still thinks of Jesus as Lord and addresses him as such. But he's not sure that he's worthy to follow him.

But the risen Jesus offers him forgiveness. And he gives Peter a mission to go out boldly and proclaim the Good News of the Resurrection and to take care of Jesus' flock. The loving Good Shepherd cares for each of his sheep, including Peter. And he brings Peter back inside the fold. And Jesus commissions Peter to do shepherding work himself.

That's a very wide spectrum of responses for these followers of Jesus in John's Gospel. There are a variety of people with a variety of timetables.

And yet they all, eventually, respond in faith to Jesus. Some take hours, others, years. Some go backwards at times before they can go forwards again. But they all eventually respond in faith.

So wherever you are on your journey of faith, John invites you to trust more fully, to believe more deeply. John invites you to more completely follow Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lamb of God, the Savior of the world.

John even says that that's why he wrote this Gospel:

"These (things) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."¹¹

However you get there...

However long it takes...

Whether you struggle with doubts...

Whether you have gone backwards at times...

Whether you've been timid or bold...

John wants you to believe in Jesus.

And John prays that through his Gospel, and through believing, you may have life in Jesus' name.

¹¹ John 20:31