

January 19<sup>th</sup>/ 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
2<sup>nd</sup> Epiphany  
John 1:29-42

This is tale of a country mouse who was really, at heart, a city mouse. While I was in college, I served on a committee of young adults for the National Episcopal Church. We planned events and national conferences, including one with Desmond Tutu as our preacher and guest. I even served as one of Bishop Tutu's body guards. I am absolutely certain that the good archbishop had a few sleepless nights knowing that it was only flimsy me between him and some potentially injurious soul. For one of the planning meetings before that conference, I was required to come, from the more rural Oklahoma to the bright lights of New York City. It was late April. New York was in full bloom. And almost as soon as I stepped off of the plane and people knocked one another down with good New York electric, kinetic energy, I felt that I was at home. New York seemed to be a natural fit. In my own home state, some labeled me as arrogant or offensive, which I just thought was efficiency, but in New York, I seemed shy, reserved, and thoughtful compared to everyone else. I will never forget another memory from that first trip, the first time a bus-driver yelled and cursed at me... Good times. But while I enjoyed myself, I never thought much about my new attachment. Moving to New York did not seem like a real possibility.

But, on my second day in the city, at the National Episcopal Church Center in Midtown, the staff officer for youth and young adult ministries pulled me aside. "You want to go to seminary, right?" "Yes," I replied. "Why don't go down and merely look at General Seminary in Chelsea?" I laughed. In fact, I protested. My bishop had already clearly dictated that I was to deliberate and choose between two seminaries and from only those two. Virginia Seminary and the Episcopal Seminary in Austin, Texas were my lackluster options. But this serpentine, snake-eyed staff officer only wanted me to partake of the big Apple. "Why don't you ssssssimply look," the snake said. "There's a cab waiting, and the admissions officer is expecting to give you a tour." I smirked and snapped downstairs. I took the cab and arrived at The General Theological Seminary. And by arrived, I mean... I arrived. The snake may have been a salesman, but this was no snake oil. There were beautiful gardens, a neo-gothic chapel, and people who didn't look like they came from Oklahoma, a real relief. Even the tiny, Manhattan, box-sized rooms seemed perfect. I thought that I was coming to New York to plan a conference. Little did I know that I was really mapping out my future and finding home.

Five weeks ago, in December I preached about John the Baptist, and how the love of Jesus compares to the rigid, austerity of John. Last week, we heard about the Baptism of Jesus at the hands of John, and why John might have said that he was unworthy to baptize Jesus. In all of these things, we have tended to focus on John, what he meant, who he was. We have been John-centric. But now that we have heard the accounts of Jesus' interactions with the baptizer from several sources and in just as many different ways, it might be appropriate, perhaps, to look a the account of John and Jesus from the perspective of Jesus himself. Because in these encounters, Jesus is finding his true home, he is locating where he fits, he is growing as a man. And just as much as my life's path changed course when I came to New York, Jesus's life changes course after meeting and befriending John.

In all likelihood, at least according to many scholars, Jesus probably sought John out because he wanted to be John's follower, a disciple of John the Baptist and nothing more. Jesus was probably not hoping to receive messianic validation and approval. Jesus was human and was learning about himself and his relationship with God in fits and starts, as we all do. And Jesus goes to John, out in the wilderness, far away from the approved religious center of Jerusalem. And it is important to note that by doing so, Jesus was making a revolutionary stand. John stood opposed to all of the cultic practices of the Temple in Jerusalem. He stood opposed to the priests who sidled up to Rome, who declared who was clean or unfit in the kingdom of God, and who demanded that the Temple and its sacrifices were the only true route to God. Jesus must have been searching for something more, some other way of envisioning his relationship with God. He had been to the Temple as a teenager. Now, Jesus searches for something different. He goes to John, the baptizer and criticizer of the Temple who offers a direct relationship with God.

There Jesus submits to John. He is baptized, and much like my stepping off of the plane in New York, Jesus has a defining, life-changing dove-shaped light bulb moment. John says, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.... And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

But much like I doubted that I could come to New York, as much as I never thought it could happen, Jesus does not seem to automatically see a way forward, at least according to John the Gospel writer. For according to John, Jesus does not leave right away, even though he knows where he needs to go. And so John and Jesus are still together. And John the Baptizer keeps proclaiming, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!". And when John the Baptist sees some potential followers of Jesus, he says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

Dear God, Jesus must have thought, shut that man up. After all, Jesus was still processing his own experiences, and besides, the concept of lambs of God did not seem like beloved children of God. Instead, they were sacrificed in the Temple, they were helpless little beings. And Jesus had come to John, not the Temple. But this is why this is a true growth moment for Jesus. He is hearing about himself in a way that he does not fully understand. John tells him that just as Jesus has submitted himself to him, he will submit himself to humanity, giving of himself, loving others, no matter the consequences. And John must have seen that this would transform everything. It would bring new life, even out of pain, even out of death.

After that meeting, I went back to Oklahoma City, and I must confess that I was extra arrogant and self-assured, New York Style. And I made an appointment with my bishop to talk about seminaries. We spoke about Virginia and Austin. We talked my choices and my desires. I slid in a brochure on General, my new New York self-assured self slowly receding. But the Bishop and I eventually made a deal. If I interviewed and went to both of the other seminaries, I could choose to go to whichever seminary I wanted. My home would be my home.

And here is where I am going to disobey my own sermon. For one more second, I need to be John-centric to understand Jesus in this moment. Jesus must have been unsure of himself and confused, but also think of John. John the Baptist was Jesus's Salieri. John must have been jealous and in pain and questioning himself. He, after all, had quite the successful ministry.

John was really reaching people. He was turning people toward an close connection with God, independent of the Temple, and yet John must have also seen, as Salieri saw Mozart, something larger than him, this agent of great love and grace. And John, like my Bishop, stepped back and allowed, painful as it was, for the Holy Spirit to lead. Perhaps it is a lesson that he gave Jesus. Perhaps it is a lesson that Jesus gave him.

Either way, these are our lessons for today: We are called to be like John, to be like my bishop, to allow others and ourselves to be open to the spirit of God, even if that spirit leads us where we do not immediately desire to go, even if it leads those around us where we would not like them to go. And we are invited to be as Jesus, searching for, yearning for, and finding our home and whom we are meant to be. We allow grace for others, and we seek it and are open to it ourselves. "When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi"... "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day." We do not know what Jesus said or showed these men that day, or what convinced them of the divine identity of Jesus. Perhaps, we are not told because that is not the point. The point is that they were open to where Jesus led them, to that journey, and because of that, they found home. And so should we. Come and See. Come and see.