

“Come and See”

February 11, 2018

Faith in Film series – The Case for Christ

How many of you watched the Super Bowl last Sunday night? As always, there was a lot of talk about if the Patriots would win again or if the Philadelphia Eagles could pull off the win. In the end, the Eagles were victorious. I was interested, though, in the focus on the way many Eagles’ players professed their faith in Christ.

There were pictures of the players praying together. Last October, the team supported one of their players as he was baptized in a hotel pool. And as it happens a lot - giving glory to God after a win - but Eagles’ quarterback Nick Foles also shared that he wants to become a pastor after his football career is over.

It can be a powerful thing to have an opportunity to share our faith in a public arena using the social capital and audience we have. And my hope is that we take those opportunities, remembering the words from First Peter, a letter to early Christians: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...* (1 Peter 3: 15)

So that’s if someone asks us about God or faith or church. *Why do you go to church? Why do you believe? How can God really care about me?* You and I know people who have those questions. We know people who claim faith in Jesus, but aren’t connected to a church home. We know people who are struggling to find hope in the midst of hard stuff. We know people who are really at a loss reconciling what they know and believe and what they see professed by Christians who spread hatred and vitriol.

Faith in Jesus won’t take pain and grief away, but it does offer some help in walking through them. Faith in Jesus doesn’t erase awful experiences, but it does help us to have a place to turn and a loving Creator who knows our struggles. Being a part of the church and having a devotional life doesn’t give us immediate and tidy answers to everything, but it’s a way to grow closer to God and seek God’s way instead of our own way (which most of us will do if given the choice!).

We know the joys of faith and church, but how many times do we invite others to “come and see” for themselves? That was a powerful part of this film *The Case for Christ*. It’s the real-life story of Lee Strobel, an investigative reporter who describes himself as an atheist and eventually becomes a true believer. But it’s not a neat and tidy story.

Strobel’s conversion experience happens because of his spouse, Leslie, who comes to faith in Jesus after a very scary incident involving their young daughter. A nurse named Alfie who is present and able to help their daughter points to God, not luck, as a reason for her presence. Alfie invites Leslie to church - to “come and see,” and Leslie begins to feel differently about faith. She shares her experience with Lee, and he

is driven to prove her wrong. His desire to prove her wrong is the impetus for his investigation.

Strobel's conversion doesn't happen quickly, and he lives by the motto: "The only truth is through facts." Lee decides to seek out the truth from professionals who can give him hard evidence. He sees an expert in ancient texts who says that there are many authenticated copies of the Greek New Testament, a physician who stands by the claim that no one could survive a Roman crucifixion, and a psychoanalyst who says it's virtually impossible for so many people to share the same delusion that Jesus rose from the dead. So he gathers some hard evidence.

As he's seeking to discredit the truth of Jesus' resurrection, Strobel is also reporting on a case of a man who turns out to be wrongfully accused of shooting a police officer. In the end, Strobel admits that he "missed the truth." The man who was wrongfully accused says that Strobel didn't want to see the truth. Seeking truth is Strobel's job, and yet it's a difficult thing, even when it comes to faith.

Though I don't remember a time in my life of not believing in God, I certainly have had moments of struggle. I think doubt is a part of faith - maybe not a place we want to stay, but certainly a place we sometimes find ourselves. I think that's just honest faith. I don't know any place in Scripture where questions, wonderings, and uncertainties aren't welcome, and in fact, I believe that God welcomes us to offer them as a way to grow in our faith.

Strobel's story reminded me of others we meet in Scripture – the psalmists who have questions for God, wise men from the East who come to investigate the appearance of a star and come to worship the infant Jesus. And there are some connections, too, with the calling of the first disciples.

Jesus is building a team of leaders - disciples who will follow him. Earlier in chapter 1, Andrew and Peter are in after Jesus invites them to "come and see" where he's staying and they spend time with him.

They call him "rabbi," which literally means "teacher." In those days, for someone to become a disciple of a rabbi meant that he or she was a student. The rabbi passed on their knowledge, and they also passed down their perspective and their specific ways of doing things. It was really an apprenticeship where the disciple would become like the rabbi and would pass their learning on to others.

And here, Philip gets up and goes when Jesus says, "Follow me." Jesus wasn't looking for the "Who's Who" crowd. He was searching for people willing to follow him – and they were nothing close to perfect. Frederick Buechner says, "The first ministers were the twelve disciples. There is no evidence that Jesus chose them because they were brighter or nicer than other people. In fact, the New Testament record suggests that they were continually missing the point, jockeying for position, and when the chips were down, interested in nothing so much as saving their own skins. Their sole

qualification seems to have been their initial willingness to rise to their feet when Jesus said, 'Follow me.'"

All we know about Philip is that Jesus found him and said, "Follow me." We don't know the rest of the conversation or if Philip realized that answering God's call probably would turn his life upside-down. My guess is probably not. We just know that Philip responded to Jesus' call and then told Nathanael that he had found the One they'd been waiting for and invited him along for the ride.

These men were well-acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures. They knew about the promised Messiah who would redeem the world. They knew God's Word, and Philip makes the connection to the actual person. Jesus is the Word made flesh as it says in the beginning of the Gospel of John.

It hasn't been much of a struggle for Jesus to find followers so far, but that changes with Nathanael. He is suspicious about this Jesus and where he comes from. *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* His less than enthusiastic reaction comes because of Nazareth's reputation. It was a nowhere town with no power or prestige. There's no reason that the Messiah would come from Nazareth. But Philip just says, "Come and see."

Our witness of faith isn't about forcing people to change; it's about letting the love of Christ work in us. It's not about intensity, but intimacy. It's not even about convincing someone to believe, but rather showing that we believe and being willing to share how and why it matters.

Philip offers an invitation just like he received from Jesus – no argument, no coercion. Philip doesn't get bent out of shape when Nathanael shows resistance. He simply says, "Come and see." He doesn't make a judgment about Nathanael's faith or lack of it. He simply says, "Come and see." Somehow Philip knows that Nathanael has to experience Jesus for himself.

We see it in this story, too. Alfie invited Leslie to "come and see" about Jesus for herself, and then Leslie did the same for Lee. Kathleen Norris writes this about "seeking" as part of Christian faith: "Over time I have learned two things about my religious quest: First of all, that it is God who is seeking me, and who has a myriad of ways of finding me. Second, my most substantial changes, in terms of religious conversion, come through other people. Even when I become convinced that God is absent from my life, others have a way of suddenly revealing God's presence." And so it happens for Nathanael. Philip's invitation to "come and see" helped him to follow Jesus. This is how God works – through people and situations we never imagined to deepen our faith and trust.

Strobel's story also made me think of how we think about God and how we understand God. **SHOW SLIDE** - Christian theologian Karl Barth offered this word as we engage the world around us: *Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from the Bible.*

And in our Methodist tradition, a scholar named Albert Outler studied John Wesley's writings and theology - the way we study and talk about God - and actually coined a term that we use in talking about United Methodism today. Outler called it the Wesleyan quadrilateral. For any of us who think in mathematics terms, a quadrilateral have four sides, and Outler saw that Wesley's theology was rooted in Scripture first and foremost. Scripture is the foundational way that God is revealed to us, but our reading of Scripture is always influenced by three other things: tradition, reason, and experience.

This was a part of Strobel's journey to faith, but so was the invitation. Leslie invited Lee to "come and see" sometimes with words, but even more through her commitment to pray for him and to be willing to wait on God's timing. It's not without struggle, but it does challenge us to consider how we share our faith with those close to us and live it boldly, but with humility just like the writer of First Peter says. It reminds me that our witness really does matter. God does the work in people's hearts, but our witness matters.

I was especially moved at the honest prayer that Lee offered when he decided that God was real, and he wanted to respond to God's grace in his life. It was pure prayer - not a formula that we sometimes hear, but a heartfelt moment of him saying, "God, I don't know what I'm doing" and continuing to seek faith and understanding as a follower of Jesus.

Maybe we can relate to that prayer. Maybe we've prayed it: "God, I don't know what I'm doing." I wonder if that's how the disciples felt. I don't think Philip and Nathanael suddenly had it all figured out, and I know I don't. There's a place for honest faith and trust that serves us well as we're inviting others to "come and see."

Today you received a post-it note with a question: "Now what?" Maybe you're not new to following Jesus like Strobel was, or maybe you are. Maybe your faith journey looks like a line that goes up, or maybe it has some dips and up moments in it. Whatever it looks like for you and for me, that question is important. What will we do with the faith we claim?

This Wednesday, we enter into a season called Lent, which is a time to prepare our hearts to receive the Good News of resurrection after we walk with Jesus through suffering and death. I pray that it can be a time to renew our faith and grow closer to the One who invites us to "come and see" what it means to live in love and offers us new life. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Come and See/The Case for Christ:

- "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can." John Wesley
- "I cannot do all the good that the world needs, but the world needs all the good that I can do." Jana Stanfield

- Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! II Corinthians 5: 17