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Come and See

J. Herbert Nelson

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John 1:43-51; 1 Samuel 3:1-10

I want to give honor and thanks to God for this honor and privilege of being here on this occasion. Many times I don't know what the Lord is up to. But I'm so glad that a long time before you knew when this building was complete I was to be here to preach.

I am thankful today to have with me, my wife, and for those who have heard this...you'll hear it again, the Minnesota Vikings are playing today, yes, but my wife was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. And no matter what territory I'm in, I plan for my key to work tonight when I get back to the house.

I am glad that Gail is here with me, the Reverend Gail Porter Nelson, who has, in so many ways, been an inspiration for me in my life. And has sacrificed much. I want to also take an opportunity to lift up Reverend Tim Hart-Andersen and his wife Beth on the ministry that they have been able to develop in this place over the years. I have watched this place grow. This is probably my third time preaching here. I also want to go back because Tim and I met in seminary at a conference in Cincinnati. He was this cool guy walking around with a hat cocked to the side on his head. And I thought, "Who does he think he is?" And now we know.

I also want to introduce Rhonda Kruse with the Presbyterian Mission Agency. Who continue in this period to rethink the future and how we work together and build bridges of hope.

This morning, I look at so many friends in this place who have worked with the General Assembly, with their ministry, who I've known over the years. It is indeed a feeling of being at home. And for this music this morning...if you can't get happy with that...I don't know what it would take. For bearing witness to my soul this morning, I want to say thank you.

Another reading for you this morning, which is a third call is taken from the Gospel of John. Let's listen to these words:

The next day, again, John was standing with two of his disciples and he looked at Jesus and walked and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said, "What do you see?" And they said to him, "Rabbi, which means teacher, where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying and they stayed with him that day. For it was about the tenth hour. One of two who heard John speak followed him with Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said, "We have found the Messiah, which means Christ." He brought him to Jesus, and Jesus looked at him and said, "So you are Simon, the son of John. You shall be called Cephas, which means Peter." Again, this is the Word of our Lord.

I ask you to consider with me this morning the sermon topic, "Come and See." Come and see. Jesus' invitation for the disciples to join him in his home created a social movement, the practices, the challenges of power and principalities within the course of his ministry. It is Jesus in this movement who begins to look at transforming a society. And these challenges were raised against the temple leaders because their preaching did not align themselves with their practices.

Today we are in a time when some of the greatest Christian conversations are grounded in left/right faith divisions. When people are crying for hope and healing. We live in a time when poor children go to school every day in our country and cannot obtain a high school diploma or function in the workplace because our system fails to provide a decent and holistic education. Not only as to how to function in school and in learning, but we are failing to teach how to function in life. And yes, the more that we experience these things, our left/right and middle...progressive left fights become more and more folly. I am convinced that none of us were born in these categories. We are a product of our environment, of our teachings, of those who we have encountered, of experiences that we've known, the struggles that we've been through that have changed our minds about what we've previously thought.

I am from South Carolina. I won't even go into the things that are part of me because I grew up in South Carolina. Some I don't even want to talk about. I am a third generation pastor. I can remember my mother - dutiful Christian woman who took me to the store to buy my clothes. And those were the days when big bell bottom pants and the shirts with the big collar were out. We carried a pick in our back pocket - that was our comb. I remember the days when we went out and all who were around me went out with that kind of attire. But what made me different was my father was a preacher and my mother was a dutiful preacher's wife. I wore those bell bottom pants one time, going to a party. And I changed those pants in the car and I took them off before I got home. The house where I'd gone to the party, the person whose house I was visiting who was the parent in that home, called my preacher daddy and my dutiful mother and said, "I didn't know that Herbie wore those bell bottom pants in high school." And so the community was the police. Didn't need any armed guards, didn't need any weapons in the community, just people telling on you all the time. You the preacher's son. But there is something about living that kind of life - the values, the expectations. Voices I hear that have long since left this world. That drive my thinking, that remind me of who I am and who I am called

to be. Those who teach me responsibility even from the heavens today. Those voices I hear. And you can't put that in a left/right and middle box. The context of South Carolina during racial segregation. Father in the line of the civil rights movement. When 27 students were shot in the back, African American students from South Carolina State University, two historically black colleges side by side and in the midst of all of that a student coming home from a movie who was a high school student to meet his mother as a matron who was on the campus where she worked. Who got caught in the crossfire. Three died from state highway patrolmen bullets. And 30 years later, after the statute of limitations had run out, the governor of the state at that time came down and offered an apology. Therefore, there was no compensation. Nothing but an apology for what the state had done. And this was during my growing years just two months before the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

You see, I am convinced today that we as the church have to get real about the lives that people are living. Not because they have to, but because we have ordered our lives in this world in such a way that we have left so many behind. That the market is flooded with the spirit of greed. Rather than the gift of giving. So our hearts are on lockdown. And while this is happening the underclass is finding themselves in systems that fail, including education. The minimum requirement to get a job of any type in this system that offer no suitable training or progressive experiences that can motivate and inspire all children to learn. The end result of their lives are destroyed in privatized prisons. Where we are engaging in an unethical practice of running through a criminal injustice system that incarcerates them in private for-profit prisons where we make money off of the warehousing of souls.

We choose to make money on their failures on the back end rather than placing money on the front end on their possibilities. And if that is not enough, please be aware that the highest spike in human trafficking, which is another fallout from a failure to educate and train and build the hope of

an ethical and moral life, the fallout relating to human trafficking is coming to your city. Your city. Your city. In numbers that you will never, ever be able to believe. Because one of the greatest times of human trafficking in the world takes place around the Super Bowl. And here we are in Minneapolis, Minnesota, preparing to hear Justin Timberlake perform our favorite song. But yet in the midst of it, this city is about to engage in assault of the human soul. And there will be women and men who will find themselves in the using mill in an underground economy in this country. And they will do it right here. In this city. Not far from this church.

You see, the call stories that you heard today...the three call stories, Eli, a patriarch of the faith. Trying to give some sense of understanding to a younger soul who comes to try and find out is he truly being called to ministry. Over and over again, over and over again, three times, this call comes. And each time sent back to bed to hear it all over again. And I want to suggest that some of our institutions are still that way. God is calling us out to be change agents and transformers of this present reality but we are not hearing the call. We are locked inside the safety of our church houses. Believing that if we are holy all by ourselves that is enough. And I want to suggest that even now in this world in which we live your seeing individuals walking in the church house. And in the midst of having being left alone to their struggles of mental health and other types of issues they find themselves taking an assault out on church houses...which I am convinced is an assault on God in a very different kind of way. Because the God we preach and teach about has not been manifest in their lives.

The power is in our relationship with Jesus and with one another, my friends. I remember once going to the doctor's office after moving to a new city, I was a newcomer to the city and this doctor was recommended very highly to me. Oh it was quite an experience. After walking in the office my first words were, "Wow." This was a modern office that looked like one of those offices that you could almost perform a surgery in. It just looked that

good. And yet, I asked the nurse upon returning, after getting a form from the desk to fill out my information, I returned it to the nurse and I sat and I waited and I waited and I waited. And I finally went up and asked when it would be my time to see the doctor? And the response was, "Well, the doctor will get to you in a minute." That was not a good sign. But I waited and went in to see the doctor and about twenty minutes later I moved in to an examining room, they took my temperature, and then they weighed me. I waited some more. Finally I ended up in an examining room just waiting and waiting. And in the midst of all of this, when the doctor came in. He was in a hurry, he wanted to know what was going on with me...I was trying to explain, he cut me off and kept going. He gave me, at the end of this, a prescription, after really not asking me any other questions. And proceeded to walk towards the door. I asked him about the medication and side effects...what is this? And he told me to ask my pharmacist. And walked out of the door. I'm on the examining table with no shirt on. I have a prescription in my hand that did not provide a verbal explanation to my questions about the medicine being prescribed...of course I did not come back to him. He did not indicate that he wanted me to come back. It really did not matter how adorning his office space may have been. His shortcoming was that he did not connect with my soul. And by the way, I did not fill that prescription, either.

This is the challenge Westminster. This is the challenge. I walked through here yesterday...I have never, ever dreamed of anything like what I saw. I've never been in a church like this, frankly, that looks like this one. And was given the deep theological explanations from your pastor, and thought through the entire space of opening this church up to the life of the community. Oh what a joy divine!

But I stopped by here this morning to tell you...that if you begin to worship the building...people will come. And they will look around. And they too will be impressed. They will come. And have conversation with you for awhile. But if the building is what you worship, and outside of

these glass windows is where you refuse to go, they will do the same thing I did in the doctor's office. They will not fill your prescription for changing their lives. They will not come back and they will have some things to say about you in the life of the community that will not be complimentary.

I am here today to say this to you, because I have seen stained glass all over our denomination where people worship the names that are on that glass but fail to walk out of it and worship the God who sends them into the world to make a difference. To use their life as a living vessel for the transformation of the realities that are all around them.

Jesus in another narrative in this particular scripture that was read today, the last one that was read from John. Is saying to his future apostles, he is basically saying to them come and see. He asked them to come to his house when they asked where he lived. And they sit with him. And having just having left the Middle East, I know that a meal was served there. I know that there was a hospitality that in some sense might have been meager, but like no other. And I also know there was a thirsting for conversation. And in so doing, the expectation of Jesus was that there would be a transformation of these souls to become followers of his and they became followers of his. And they did it because the beginning was hospitality. The beginning was opening the doors.

My wife and I pastored together in Memphis, Tennessee. The place where Dr. King was killed. And much like the work that the Galloways are doing to embrace the poverty and the poor. And to declare that the captives can be set free. It was one of the hardest works I've ever had. Because seminary didn't train me to do that. It trained me for the best. But this, in a sense, was dealing with people who are on the edge every single day of their lives. And yet in that particular ministry I can honestly say that I learned more than I gave. Because I learned how people live on the edge day by day and struggle against powers and principalities that they can't even name. The systemic evil. And yet, the embrace that they felt simply by

being loved and cared for and being in conversation, with people other than those that they have to struggle was concrete. They taught Bible study many nights when folks came through, and not knowing what to do with their pain. I had not experienced what they had experienced, and yet some of them became some of the greatest Bible study teachers on the spur of the moment. They would say, “Rev., let me take this one.” And they would tell their story of struggle. But then they would circle back and say, “Oh, but then the Lord came into my life.” And it didn’t mean that everything changed but what it meant was that I had somewhere to go! Someone I could depend on...which was not the case when I was outside on the street. And yet as they would tell their story and I would listen, they were in charge of the Bible study. It is interesting how when they told their story, tears came from those who heard it. Who related to it. But who also had been freed up from the burden of their lives to try and be transformed.

This is not about patchwork today. This is about transformative ministry. Helping to change people’s lives so that they may see their lives more clearly. And believe that they are vessels of hope and possibility. That when they walk into this door if nobody has said, “I love you” all week and meant it – not asking for something, but meant it in terms of a heartfelt connection and spirit, they need to be able to hear it in THIS place...if they don’t hear it anywhere else. Somebody who talked to them, somebody who will spend time with them just for a minute. Someone who has the ability to just be human.

I stopped by here today to say to you I love what this looks like and I’m going to talk about this place. And I’m going to let folks know the great work that can be done when we put our hearts and minds to it and when we take that which God has given us and we use it – not for what we think we ought to have, but what God has given us. Which more often than not is more than enough. To take what we have and to use it for the glory of God. And yes you’ve done it in this edifice.

But I also want to suggest that we've got to do it in our lives. And this is what Dr. King was talking about. A prophet in his own time. He was a prophet called by God to remind us that the core of our nature was formed to love. And anything oppositional to love is oppositional to God. Our call to love and desire, to be love, is the natural inclination of human beings but there must be an inner core that centers us. We desire love because our Bible reminds us that in the letters of John that God IS love. And, therefore, if we believe in God, then we know that anything oppositional to God is oppositional to love. How do we love more deeply those that we don't know? How do we love more deeply those that we do know? How do we love because love is the righteous thing to do? It is the Godly thing to do. How do we love oftentimes, indiscriminately, another human being, taking the risk, when we know they have need to be loved. Westminster, your challenge is not to be consumed with the love of this building at this point, but it is to be consumed with God's love and share it in this downtown area. Share it across this particular city. And yet, remember in all things that God has loved you and graced you to be where you are. Grace is abundant to all of us. We can all name someone who is more deserving to be here today than we are. But God spared us for another day's journey.

As I move toward a close, I grew up in the Jim Crow south, traveled to South Africa during the middle of apartheid, investigating for the Presbyterian Church what was taking place that we might look and how we would respond to apartheid. And I just left the Middle East, watching the occupation on the Jericho road, which Dr. King preached about, the Good Samaritan text. There's a wall dividing the Palestinians, actually pushing them out, from the middle of the city on the Jericho road. So here we are, thinking about a road where someone who had no knowledge of distress of the person in the text, stopped by on the side of the road to help one in this narrative of the Good Samaritan. Who actually their people had no engagement or interaction with. And now a physical wall exists to divide.

I watched the wall all around Jerusalem, around Israel, and saw the separation and the barriers, intentionally. I was there on the night that our President made the announcement about moving the embassy.

Immediately we heard gunshots in the city. And for the next few days school children were throwing rocks at the police and they were shooting teargas back at children. I've heard the arguments that we are the friends of the Jewish community all over our nation. They are my friends. I don't think we ought to boycott. They are my friends. I have some friends I don't agree with. But I stopped by here to tell you today that I also try to muster up the courage to let them know that. Particularly when it is not in their best interest and certainly not in the interest of the people being hurt.

We are allowing in this period in our nation a President who wakes up in the morning at 2:00 in the morning and tweets some of the most insulting things to humanity and to people. We are waking up in the morning to newscasts that we are hearing him calling nations of people with vulgarity rather than their names. And saying, in essence, that we don't want them here. I've traveled to New Hampshire, and I've seen Indonesian Christians, Presbyterian Christians, who we taught the Gospel, standing in an ICE office about to be deported. Praying with them before they went up on the elevator, made to pay for their own plane tickets in order to get out of the country. And then asked to report over and over again until this country can get the clearance to send them back to Indonesia and the reason they came to this country in the first place was because Muslims were killing them in Indonesia. Send them back to death, rather than to have them here in life.

We have in this particular year, after the largest march ever constructed in history, who gathered right after the inauguration, turn right around in this period, and allow this government to run amuck and to take the lives of people and to pull the rug out from hope and possibility for coming together.

The words of the Statue of Liberty, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free” are totally being erased and eroded every day by what is taking place in Washington D.C. today. I want to suggest that as Jesus did, not worrying about his reputation, not worrying about what people are going to say about him, not even worried about what might happen to him, and what dr. King did, to try and transform a nation, ought to be models of how we, as a church, in this particular time, must live by faith and not by sight.

This is the challenge of our time, my friends. This is what I really stopped by today here to tell you. But I also came by to tell you congratulations. I also came to tell you, you did a great a great job. And you’re modeling a great way. I stopped by to tell you, you have much and you have used it for the glory of God in this place. And you have brought two other churches in to the mix along with the life of this community and made this place a light upon the hill. A light upon the hill.

Don’t stop what you’re doing. Don’t stop what you’re doing! Bring people in and transform lives. Let the world know that there is a place called Westminster. There is a place that can take a little something and can do a lot. But also can take a lot and do a whole lot more.

Let the world know that you are a church that can take a vision from an unfinished parking lot and change a whole city and stand firm in the liberty where Christ Jesus has set you free. Let the world know that you are standing firm in a way that all of us can if we follow your lead and stand in the way that you have. Oh Tim...I have to say this in closing. You a bad man!