

Where are you Staying?

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Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, NYC

They said to Jesus, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” John 1: 29-42

The other night I was walking home along Broadway, when I heard shouting. It came from a man sitting on the sidewalk near McDonald’s, calling out, “Mary Jane’s jeans! Mary Jane’s jeans!”

I kept walking, wondering who was Mary Jane, and what was so inspiring about her jeans... Wondering how Mary Jane and her jeans had triggered this poor guy to call out so passionately into the West Side crowd walking by, “Mary Jane’s jeans!”

I was almost to the next corner by the time I realized that he wasn’t telling us about Mary Jane and her jeans, he was calling out, “Spare change, please!”

I didn’t have much on me, but I decided I’d better go back and help him clear up his message. I gave him a buck and I said to him, “You know, I would have stopped a minute ago, but I couldn’t understand what you were saying. I thought you were saying ‘Mary Jane’s jeans.’” And he looked confused at first, then he nodded, and he thanked me and blessed me, and I smiled, knowing I had done something to help him get the message straight.

I hadn’t gone very far when I heard the call, “Mary Jane’s jeans!”

That little incident sums up for me the challenge of the Christian message.

There are so many times we’re not so sure what we’ve heard, we’re not sure of the message, we’re not sure what it means, we don’t know whether it applies to us. And if it does apply to us, we’re not sure how to respond. And if we do respond, we’re not sure it will change anything. And when we try to share it, too often it comes out sounding like Mary Jane’s jeans.

All we may know, all we can witness to, is that like the Psalm we shared today:

Once we were down in a pit, and somebody got us out.
Once we were stuck, mired in the mud of our lives, and somebody who wasn’t us helped us figure it out. Once we were down so low everything else looked like up and we suddenly found the strength to sing a new song:

**God took a new song
And put it in my mouth
A song of praise
To the Lord our God.**

I wanted to make sure you were with me.

Thank God for those moments, because the rest of the time we walk around not sure what to believe, not sure who to follow, not sure what God wants, confronted by a Gospel that sometimes sounds like somebody calling out about Mary Jane's jeans.

How refreshing to turn the pages to John's gospel and hear this story of faithful witness and faithful discipleship.

John is the go-to guy for flagging faith and irksome questions. Unlike, say, Paul, who fills his epistles with frustration & self-doubt along with faith, John is sure of his message and sure of his Lord. Unlike the other three gospel writers, Mark, Matthew and Luke, John presents a Jesus who questions himself only for dramatic effect. Self-doubt is for everyone else. John's Jesus is a man who is sure of his mission, sure of his God, and sure also of his love for this embarrassing bunch of conscripts he calls not only his disciples, but his friends.

Today, we see Jesus meeting a couple of the people who are going to be his disciples. He meets them courtesy of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is standing with two of his own disciples when Jesus walks by. Despite the fact that he's looking at the competition, looking at his spiritual competition, John can't help himself.

"Here is the Lamb of God! Here comes a person who ranks ahead of me. I saw the spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it hovered over him!" He's the one! I'm good, he's better!

Can you picture Hillary Clinton saying that about Barack Obama, or John McCain saying that about Mitt Romney? Not really.

And John's disciples get all curious and they start to follow Jesus, not follow him as his disciples might do, but stalk him, watch him, spy on him.

But Jesus sees them following him. He asks them what they want. And they respond with a strange question,

"Rabbi, where are you staying? Teacher, where are you staying?" Where are you staying?

That seems like a funny thing to ask.

Clearly they want to know something about Jesus.

Clearly, the things John the Baptist says about Jesus makes them want to know more.

But why do they ask him where he is staying?

If we know anything about Jesus, we know he never stays anywhere. He's always on the road. He's always on the move. Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests but the son of man has nowhere to rest.

But the word stay is a short word with a long meaning. The Greek word *méno*, stay, is used in scripture to describe how the three persons of the trinity, the Creator, the Son and the Spirit, relate together. The word *méno* is used to describe how God relates to us. There is a rich spiritual meaning to the word that's not really carried by our word 'stay'. Where are you staying? is a rich question that asks how are you connected? How are you rooted? What are you about? What do you care about? What do you live for?

It's a complicated question, and it can't have an easy answer. And Jesus gives the only answer that's really possible when he says, "Come and see."

You want to know what I'm about? Come and see.

You want to know what I care about? Come and see.

You want to know what God is doing in me? Come and see.

You want to know what I stand for? Whom I stand with? You'd better come with me and come and see.

Because I could tell you, but that wouldn't tell you anything. Because anyone can say anything.

Andrew, one of John's disciples, takes Jesus up on the offer, but not only that, on the way he grabs his brother Simon, the guy Jesus will re-name Peter, the rock. Andrew wants to see, sure, but he also wants to share. Because he thinks he's onto something. He doesn't want to miss out on it. And he doesn't want his brother to miss out on it either.

Come and see, he tells Peter. Come and see. I believe this is the one we've waited for, the hope we yearn for; come and see. As the old spiritual goes,

I believe this is Jesus, come and see, come and see.

Oh, I believe this is Jesus, come and see, come and see.

The light of God shines in his face; come and see, come and see!

He offers all his pardoning grace! Come and see! Come and see!

If I want to know you and understand you and see how you fit into life and see what you care about and see who your God is, I could ask you, sure, but I might not know a whole lot more than I do now. But invite me to come and see, and I'll learn all that and more.

Where are you staying? Where are you staying?

Last night some of us went down to LaGuardia High School, New York's high school of performing arts, for a concert by their fantastic Gospel Chorus. For two hours, a hundred talented students sang to us about faith, God, Jesus, the need to struggle, the need to persevere, the need to share the good news.

They were a musically-serious, disciplined lot, led by a musically-serious, disciplined director, who, reacting to unruly outbursts and calls from the house soon turned us into a musically-serious, disciplined audience.

Of course, an audience isn't what Gospel music requires. It requires not quiet appreciation, but participation. It took a little while, after all we were in a high school auditorium, not a church, but by and by we in the audience were doing our share to move the concert along: singing, swaying, standing, clapping, encouraging.

We were witnessed to in song that God is able, and we agreed.

We were encouraged to fight our spiritual battles, and we said yes.

We were told that God don't want no coward soldier, no lying, weak-kneed, hypocrite, coward soldier, and I vowed not to be one.

We heard the sung witness of one young man who "Never would have made it without God," and I thought of a time or two when that was true for me. When I was mired in the mud, down in the pit. Looking for a song. Looking for a new song.

I had spent most of the day in a spiritual funk, the kind of funk that always happens the day before I preach, when I wonder just what in heaven's name I could share that would be worth your time to listen to.

But suddenly there I was, being fed and witnessed to, with sincerity, integrity and intensity, by a hundred teenagers, some of whom had no doubt signed up for Gospel Chorus as they would for any class, but none of whom seemed unmoved, unchanged by the songs they were singing. It made me wish I could hire them to follow me around and sing me through a few things. That would give me the courage and the capacity to share my faith, my story, my Jesus, my God, my song, with a world that's thirsty for faith.

I felt lifted out of the day's funk, and when the concert was over, I decided to walk home to clear my head and let God help me sort out the day's self-doubts from the faithful witness I'd been treated to. And as I walked I remembered how the great theologian Karl Barth responded when someone asked him to sum up Christian theology in a sentence. Reportedly, he quoted not from his 20 volume *Church Dogmatics*, filled with articulate and well reasoned argument, but which so often comes out sounding like Mary Jane's jeans to me. Barth quoted the old children's song: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Not all of us have the opportunity to witness as those students did.

But we all have a song to sing. We all have a faith to share. And if we share it with love and integrity, other people will want to see. They'll want to come and see.