

“They said to Jesus, where are you staying? And Jesus said to the disciples, Come and see, and they went and saw. It was about 4 o’clock in the afternoon.”

No one knows for sure who wrote the Gospel of John, who wrote down this story about Jesus and his first disciples. It may be that it was written by John the disciple of Jesus or by a community of disciples who associated with John or by some combination of the two. Whoever it was, I’ve always wondered why they chose to include that it was 4 p.m. when Jesus met his first disciples. I mean, what difference does it make whether it was early in the morning, late in the afternoon, or in the middle of the night when the disciples decided to go off with Jesus? Except I think we know that it makes all the difference in the world what time of day it was.

For how many things in our own lives do we pinpoint to a specific hour, even right down to the exact minute? The doctor’s appointments, the soccer practice and ballet rehearsal that we don’t want to be late for. The TV show that we don’t want to miss, the one we put the kids to bed early for just so we can watch it in peace.

For how much of our lives do we watch the clock?

When I was working as a hospice chaplain and a person would die at home, a nurse had to be called to go and attend to the patient. Naturally, it would often take some time for a nurse to get there, so that by the time they were able to check for a pulse and confirm the death, an hour or two might have passed since the person had actually died. This could be hard for some families and I remember one woman telling me, “My husband’s death certificate doesn’t have the right time written on it.” Sometimes an approximation won’t do. We need it to be exact.

This can be true even when it comes to going to church. Ever hear someone say, “We were doing great until two months ago when so and so came along.” Or have you ever

overheard heard someone ask, “What church do you go to?” And someone else says, “Oh I go to church at 8:30.” Now what sort of answer is that? Is church what happens at a certain time of day? 8:30 or 10 a.m. Is it not one church? Are we not one body? But I get it. We prefer certain times of day. We like to get up before the sun. We are night owls.

Then there are things for which we can’t remember when they happened. The elderly person who can’t recall when they moved or when they last ate or when they last took their pills or are supposed to take them again. Or the parent who says, “When did you grow up so fast? When did that happen?” Of course, we know when it happened. It happened when we weren’t paying attention.

Sometimes the clock moves too fast; sometimes too slow. Like in the waiting room at the hospital. “What time is it?” “11:30.” “What time is it now?” “11:32.” “That’s it? Feels like it’s been forever.”

Or the moments on the clock that we don’t want to recall. Not everyone wants to be reminded of when it was that their loved one died. That it was Christmas morning at 8:22 a.m.

I have been in religious circles where in order to be a true bona fide member of the group it was necessary to be able to pinpoint the moment when “God saved you,” when, to use the language of John’s Gospel, Jesus came into your life and you left everything behind to follow him. Between the ages of 9 and 16, I attended a camp every summer in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Beautiful place. Horses, a lake to swim, kayak, and canoe in, arts and crafts, hiking, and counselors who were fun and caring. But on the wall in the staff lounge hung a very large piece of white paper with the name of every kid in the camp who was not saved. Now I used to think there was a way to know. That if you behaved a certain way—if you drank, watched R rated movies, went around kissing girls or just thinking about kissing girls, used swear words, and listened to the radio—then you weren’t saved. But if you prayed a certain prayer and swore off sin and kissing to give your heart to Jesus, then in that moment you were saved, and your name could be crossed off the list in the staff lounge.

I have since come to believe that these are not at all the things that save us or that keep us from being saved, but every now and then I'll still hear from someone who's not sure if they're saved and they want to know what they need to do. I heard it just this past week when meeting with a family who wants to have their baby baptized here at Four Corners. As I always do, I asked the parents, "Can you tell me what baptism means to you and why you want to see your child baptized?"

"We just want our child to be safe. God forbid anything happen to them and they're not baptized, they're not, you know, saved."

But I'll tell you what I told them. There's nothing magical about baptism. Baptism isn't a ticket to be punched, with a time stamped on it, telling us when it was that God saved us. Baptism may mark the right path for us to go down, but it cannot keep us on the path. For that we need something, or someone, more.

John the Baptist (who is not the same John as the one who might have written this gospel) knows this, that baptism can't save us. Which is why, when he sees Jesus walk by he turns to two of his own disciples and proclaims, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." And this is when we get that verse, the one where the disciples ask Jesus, "Where are you staying?" And Jesus tells them, "Come and see," and they go and see, and it was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

To really appreciate the significance of this moment, and why it must have felt important enough for someone to write down the hour when it occurred, we need to look at the what was going on right before it happened. You know, it's a bit like thinking back to what the parents were doing right before the baby came, or how, when grandpa died, all the family was gathered at his bedside, telling stories, and someone prayed and just as they said amen, grandpa died. These are come-and-see moments. Moments when you had to be there to believe it. Moments when everything changed. Turning points, or what T.S. Eliot once called, "still points in a turning world."

So, what was going on in the moments just before Jesus came along? Well, the writer tells us that it was the next day again and John the Baptist was standing around with

two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” And the two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

Did you catch that? It’s really quite remarkable. It happens so fast, though, that you almost miss it. Let me read it again: “The next day John again was standing around with two of *his* disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” And the two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

Did you catch that? It would appear that Jesus’ first disciples weren’t his at all. They were John’s! This shouldn’t surprise us, I guess, that John the Baptist had followers. We know he was an eccentric character, someone who could attract a crowd. Going around wearing clothes made of camel hair, dining on locusts and wild honey. He was an outspoken critic of establishment politics and religion. Everywhere John went he preached a message of change and invited everyone who wanted to get serious about change to put their money with their mouth and get baptized. Apparently, some did, for we are told John had disciples and that among them was a man named Andrew.

We’re never given much information about Andrew but it’s enough for us to know that up until now he has been one of John the Baptist’s disciples. Andrew hasn’t been sitting around at home just waiting for the wind to shift, waiting for something good to come along and kick down his door. Every morning Andrew has been getting out of bed and going out to meet up with John—to go where John goes, to listen to what John says, to see the world through John’s eyes. Not because John is anything special. John has told anyone with ears to hear, “Listen, I am not the Messiah. I am no savior. I am not a prophet or a general. I am a voice—just a voice—crying out in the wilderness, saying, make straight the way of the Lord.”

“For how long?” People would ask John.

“For how long what?”

“For how long must we cry out?”

“Until the rough places are made smooth and the hills are laid low and the poor are lifted up and all are fed, then the glory of the Lord will be revealed.”

So, Andrew is out there with John every day, putting his hands to the moral arc of the universe and bending it towards justice. Until one day, John sees Jesus walking by and he realizes the universe is finally starting to give way.

“Look,” John says to Andrew, “he’s the one we’ve been waiting for. He’s the one who is going to set things straight once and for all.” And just like that we’re told Andrew left John behind to go with Jesus. It was about 4 o’clock in the afternoon.

It’s remarkable really. We spend our whole lives in search of something. We listen to the radio. We look at the billboards. We sit under a tree. We go to work. We walk through the mall. We come to church. We search deep within ourselves. And then one day someone comes along who says, “Don’t you think it’s about time to try something new? I’m going out to the place where the rough things are made smooth and the poor are lifted up. Why don’t you come along?” And we who would go will never be the same again.

Amen.