Sunday, January 20, 2002
WHERE ARE YOU STAYING?
John 1:35-42

There are times when I am reading and studying the Bible, especially the stories about Jesus in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, that I wish tape recorders had been invented two thousand years earlier, and that someone had recorded, word for word, what Jesus said and what other people said in response. That's especially true of the conversations that are reported in the gospel named John. These conversations are frequently puzzling and difficult to understand. They seem to take place on several different levels at once. Sometimes the questions do not seem to make much sense, and the answers don't seem to match the questions.

The story this morning from John's gospel is a good example. John the Baptist was standing with two of his followers. As Jesus walked by, John said, "This man is the Lamb of God." When John's two followers heard this, they left John and followed Jesus. When Jesus noticed these two following him, he turned and asked, "What are you looking for?" That's a strange multi-layered question. We can only guess what Jesus meant with that question. Did he mean, "Are you looking for another leader to follow rather than John?" Or did he mean, "Are you trying to find a purpose for your life? Is there something lacking in your life? Are you searching for a deeper relationship with God? What are you really looking for in life?"

They answered his question by asking an even more unusual question. They asked Jesus, "Where are you staying?" What's the meaning of that question? Did they want to know if he was staying at a Motel Six or a Ritz-Carlton? Or did they want to know where he was staying so they could ask more questions and get better acquainted in case he didn't have time to deal with their questions now? Or maybe they wanted to know since they were following him, would they have to walk one mile or five miles before they got to where he was staying and could sit down and talk. Or were they asking, "Who are you really? What do you have to offer us in the way of spiritual growth? What's the foundation of your faith?"

Or maybe, like some of us, they weren't quite sure of what they wanted in life or what they were looking for, so they didn't even know the right question to ask. Maybe they had a vague sense that they wanted what a lot of people want: a comfortable way of living, good health, children who are successful, security as we grow older, and to have some fun along the way. So they ask, "Where are you staying?" In other words, "Where are you finding your home in the world? What is the foundation of your life? Is it bringing you a sense of well-being?"

To the question, "Where are you staying?" Jesus gave an answer with an invitation. He said, "Come and see." With that response, I'm sure Jesus was not saying, "Come and take a look at my room. You'll like the way it's decorated." He was rather inviting them to come to know him better. It's not about eyesight, it's about insight.

The story doesn't tell us what all they talked about in their several-hour visit. But we do know the result. Not only did they stay with him most of the day, as it turned out, they stayed with him for the rest of their lives.

They also told others about him. One of the two was named Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. What Andrew did was to find his brother Simon Peter and tell him, "We have found the

Messiah," and then Andrew took his brother to meet Jesus in person. And he also stayed with Jesus the rest of his life and became the leader of the group.

This is a story about a "come and see" methodology. Jesus was gathering a following, rounding up a group of disciples. When someone is interested enough to ask, "Where are you staying?" or "What's the foundation of your life?" or, as someone might ask you or me, "Where do you go to church?" The best answer is, "Come and see."

Come and see what the Christian way of life is. It's an invitation to come to know God as intimately as God knows you. Come and see what abundant life is all about. Come and see what a life of meaning and purpose and God-service looks like. As these two early disciples learned, if you accept the invitation to "come and see," you can never be sure where it will lead.

This past week, we celebrated the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. When God called him through the invitation of a group of leaders in Montgomery, Alabama, who were looking for someone to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, to "come and see," he had no idea where this would take him.

One of the places it took him was the Birmingham jail in 1963. He was part of the civil rights protests being staged in that city that incited the wrath of police commissioner "Bull" Connor, who pledged to incarcerate every African American who challenged segregation. On Good Friday afternoon, King was among 54 marchers who were arrested and thrown in jail for violating an injunction against "parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing, and picketing."

King received no first-class treatment in jail. In fact, he was singled out for isolation and denied the chance to make phone calls or talk to his lawyers. He had no mattress or linen and was sleeping on metal slats. And yet, over that Easter weekend, deep in solitary confinement, down in what was called "the hole," sealed off from his fellow prisoners and the outside world, Martin Luther King, Jr. was staying with Jesus. It was while he was locked up that King wrote one of the most significant Christian documents of the civil rights movement: his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." It was written on scraps of paper that were smuggled into him by other prisoners.

Surprisingly, his letter was addressed not to abusive police officers or racist politicians, but to a group of white, liberal Alabama clergy who were urging people to withdraw from demonstrations, which they called "unwise and untimely."

When you ask the question of Jesus, "Where are you staying?" and he invites you to "come and see," if you accept the invitation you will find yourself in some surprising places.

Do you remember another story that Jesus told us about where he is staying? It's found in the gospel called Matthew, chapter 25, beginning with verse 35. He said, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will ask, "When was it we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And he answers, "As you did to one of the least of

these my sisters and brothers, you did it to me." If you ask Jesus where he is staying and he invites you to "come and see," you are going to find yourself in places you hadn't expected.

Where are you staying? Come and see. We are very good at that here in First-Plymouth Church. We are a seeker-friendly community. We practice the "come and see" methodology. If you would ask a representative group of members of this congregation what they believe, in other words, "Where are you staying?" you would get a pretty wide range of ways of expressing one's faith. We understand that religious faith is a journey, not a fixed destination. Like our ancestors, we are a people on the move. We believe there is always more truth and light to come forth from God's word. You don't have to have all the answers to be a part of this community of God's people. You are invited to come and see.

When people say to me, "Tell me about First-Plymouth Church, where are you staying?" I respond, "Come and see."

Come and see our work with Habitat for Humanity. Come and see Daywatch, a daytime ministry to homeless people in downtown Lincoln. We began that ministry. Come and see our ministry to children of all ages in our Sunday Church School. Come and see our ministry to youth in our youth ministries. Come and see our ministry to children in the community in our First-Plymouth weekday Preschool and Discovery Days programs, and in our Parent's Day Out ministry. Come and see our Stephen Ministry of care-giving. Come and see our Singles Ministry and its wide-ranging programs. Come and see and experience the presence of God in our three weekly worship services, our once-a-month Taizé Service, and in our far-reaching television and radio ministry. Come and see how you can continue to grow in all kinds of adult education opportunities. Come and see and experience God's presence in our music ministry. Where is our congregation staying? Come and see.

If it were possible, I would also invite people who ask, "Where are you staying?" to come and see where our church members spend their working days. That's where most of our ministry takes place — through individual members in their everyday lives. Each one is a minister in his or her own way. I could take you into the classrooms of public schools, colleges, and universities throughout the city, where church members who are teachers are inspiring young people to learn and grow. The children and young people who are in the classroom are carrying out their ministry by learning all they can learn so that they can make a contribution to our life together.

I could take you into the offices of lawyers, secretaries, office workers, stock brokers, bankers, physicians, nurses, and you would see our church members carrying out their ministries. I could take you into nursing homes, assisted living facilities, retirement communities, and you would find our church members carrying out their ministries as residents, and others as workers. I could take you into numerous places in this city and county where our church members are doing volunteer work.

Our congregation is filled with people pursuing many varied vocations where their individual ministries are carried on. I cannot name them all, but here are a few more — police officers, firefighters, carpenters, contractors, computer programmers, engineers, salespeople, college and university administrators, advertising agencies, and parents who are not working outside the home so they can take care of their children.

When you ask Jesus, as represented by our congregation as the body of Christ alive and at work, "Where are you staying?" you can get a wide range of inspiring answers. And there is

still room for us to grow in this congregation in what we give and in what we are doing in places where we should be staying. There's room for us to grow as a "come and see" congregation. There are people you meet every day who are waiting for you to invite them to "come and see." They want to know, in a metaphorical sense, "Where are you staying?" Where do you get your spiritual energy?

When I meet new people, I often ask them, "What is your religious background? Do you presently attend a church on a regular basis? Do you have some connection with a community of faith?" In other words, where are you staying in your religious journey?

Sometimes people will tell me about an unfortunate experience they've had with a church or religious group, how they've been hurt. I never try to convince them with words to try again, but I invite them to try our church. I invite them to "come and see." It's always okay to courteously issue an invitation.

It's also a good question to ask yourself from time to time. Where are you staying? Are you stuck in your religious journey? Are you always staying with the status quo? Or are you open to new ways of learning about and experiencing the Spirit of God? You can be limited by your expectations so that you can be blind to the work of God in your midst. Where are you staying? Are you willing to examine and maybe even change some of your assumptions about God?

Most of you know what it is to settle down into a state of un-expectancy, a habit of not expecting very notable things of yourself and others. Your life can become dull because you refuse, when invited, to consider a new idea or a new outlook, or to re-evaluate an opinion you have about someone. When you are invited to "come and see," you might be unwilling to do so.

Where are you staying? Amen.