

1

I remember when my children were young, after Christmas they would invite their friends to come and see all their new toys. They wanted to share the joy of having new things to play with, so they would gather on the living room floor trying out each new item.

Now I get to come and see my children's newest adventures by following them on Facebook. My son posts news about the latest detection of gravitational waves, and over the holidays I enjoyed seeing pictures of my daughter and children in her preschool classroom in China and the photos of her recent vacation to Shanghai. Technology offers a whole new way to come and see what our friends and family are doing.

How many times has someone said to you, "Look at these photos on my phone of my grandchildren. Aren't they cute?" Or "Look at this photo of my new puppy." We have so many ways to invite others to come and see what's happening in our lives.

That's what this season after Christmas is all about—the seasons of Epiphany, a Greek word

Come and See
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Central Christian Church, Elkhart & First Christian Church, Mishawaka

meaning "appearance." The stories invite us to come and see the amazing appearance of Jesus. We begin with the arrival of the Wisemen who came to see his appearance in the world as a young child, and then the season includes Jesus' baptism and the wedding when Jesus turned water into wine. All of these events invite us to come and see what's happening—something exciting's going on.

Recently second grader Norah in Mishawaka invited a reporter to come and see something exciting going on at her school: their collection of plastic caps and lids from water bottles, detergent containers, and milk jugs. She's on a mission to collect 400 pounds of these lids, which eventually will be made into a Buddy Bench for her school playground. Norah explained, "A Buddy Bench is a bench where a child can sit if he or she has no one to play with at recess."¹ When children sit on the bench, that lets others know they need someone to play with; they need someone to come and see that they are looking for a friend. Over 1000 elementary schools on six continents have installed Buddy Benches where children can sit to indicate they need

John 1:35-46

2

a friend.² What a great way to invite others to come and see that someone needs a buddy! What a great model for the church—a place where people can find others who care.

As I thought about the enthusiasm that Norah had for what was happening in her school, I began to wonder: What if we had such enthusiasm about inviting others to come and see our church? Maybe we could consider the place we sit each Sunday a Buddy Pew—a place where one can sit and find a friend. Just imagine what it would be like if every Sunday we were so excited about what God is doing here that you said to someone, “Come and see what’s happening at my church. We have a Buddy Pew reserved for you.”

That’s the kind of enthusiasm that two people had when they encountered Jesus for the first time. Two followers of John the Baptizer saw Jesus passing by, and John exclaimed, “Look, here is the lamb of God!” That phrase seems like an odd thing to say, but earlier John had exclaimed about Jesus, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29). John may have been referring to

the sacrificial system used in the temple, where a sheep was sacrificed as an offering, as a way of asking for forgiveness. When John wrote his Gospel many years later after Jesus had died, he built into the beginning of the story a hint about Jesus’ death at the end of the story by referring to him as a lamb, as a sheep that gets sacrificed. But even with the hint of death at the beginning of his story, John remembered the excitement of those early disciples who decided to follow Jesus for the first time.

Two followers of John seemed oblivious to the imagery of death when John called Jesus a lamb, for Andrew and another disciple eagerly begin following Jesus instead of John. When Andrew inquired about where Jesus was staying, Jesus replied, “Come and see.”

When the gospel writer tells this story, John used a Greek word translated as “see,” but the word means more than just casually looking at something. The word also means “to perceive, to understand.” In addition, when saying “come,” the Greek word also means “to go.” In other words, “come and see” doesn’t mean to casually look at

3

something and then just stand there unaffected, but Jesus' invitation to "come and see" carried an expectation of a reaction, an involvement, like when a child invites a friend to come and see her new Christmas presents and gets involved by playing with them.

Jesus expected Andrew, one of those who decided to follow him, to not only come, but to go and do something. Andrew was so impressed with his encounter with Jesus that he went and got his brother Peter and told him, "We have found God's Chosen One." Andrew then extended the invitation to Peter, "You must come and see."

The following day Jesus went to another town, and there Philip encountered Jesus, and he invited Philip to follow him as well. Philip then went and found Nathaniel and told him the exciting news, but Nathaniel resisted and said, "You've got to be kidding." When Nathaniel seemed a bit doubtful, Philip exclaimed, "Come and see!"

What began with the invitation of Jesus to come and see spread to those who followed him. The invitation was contagious.

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It's a bit like what Pastor Johnson discovered when he became the new minister at St. John's Church. It was a small town, containing a gas station, a small local grocery, a high school, and a couple of congregations. As Pastor Johnson visited members of the congregation and listened to their stories, he often asked them how they happened to join St. John's Church. Many times he heard the same answer: Martha down at the local grocery. It seemed that as people bought their groceries, she would talk with them while checking out their items. During the conversation she would invite them to church.

Pastor Johnson decided to investigate how many people had come to church through Martha, so he began tracking their responses. He discovered an amazing thing: 63 people—almost half of the active members—were involved in the church because of Martha's invitation to come and see.³

Her enthusiasm and invitations were contagious, the most important factors in that congregation. Disciples pastor Martha Grace Reese discovered that this action is the most important in the growth of a

John 1:35-46

④

church. For her bestselling book *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*, Reese interviewed 1000 people in a four-year Mainline Evangelism Project to try and understand how congregations reached out to others. Do you know the most significant factor in attracting others to church? It's not whether the church has a new building or a great location or has contemporary worship. What she discovered is that almost 60% of new members of churches "get there first because a person invited them, or because they know someone in the church."⁴ She remarked, "This was one of the clearest findings of our study." In other words, it's because someone said, "Come and see."

And then she wondered, what brings visitors back? The most significant factor was the people of the congregation; the "warmth, the love, the 'realness' of the church members."⁵ The second

factor was the pastor. The doctrine or theology or denominational affiliation made a difference to only 5% of the people. You are the most significant factor in attracting new people to a church.

In light of her research, I invite you to think of one thing you would want people to come and see at our church. I'll give you a few moments to think....

Now we're going to practice—tell someone near you about what you would want others to come and see and experience in our church...

Let's hear someone of those ideas. Why would you invite someone here? What is there to come and see? ...

During this New Year, I invite you to extend an invitation to others to come and see not only what we are doing, but to come and see and experience what God is doing among us.

¹ "Find a New Friend on The 'Buddy Bench' at Hums School," *The Mishawaka Enterprise*, 12-21-17.

² <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2016/wanted-playground-buddy>

³ *Emphasis*, January—February 2000, p. 38.

⁴ Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*, Chalice Press, 2006, p. 76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77