

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from January 20, 2007

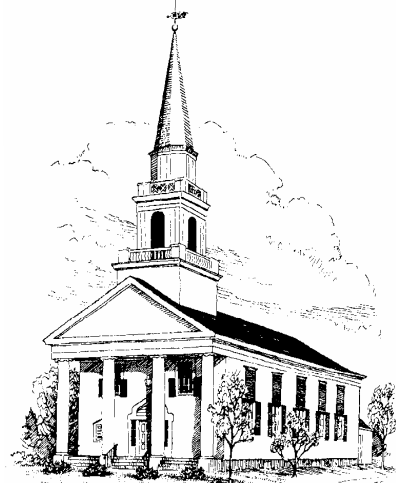
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

### “Come Along and See For Yourself”

Scriptures:

Isaiah 49:1-7

John 1:29-42



**W**e've all heard the old adage – you've got to see it to believe it! Many of us probably have that approach to life. We have to really see things for ourselves before we can really believe them.

In our lessons for today, we sense a strong line running through both of them that reminds us that each of us is called by God. In this light-filled season of Epiphany, we pray that this light will assist us in understanding the meaning of our call. In Isaiah we hear the servant remembering that he has been a child of God since even before his birth and we are invited to remember that we, too, are servants of God's.

And here in our gospel text today we hear Jesus invite two men—both have been followers of the preacher John—to “come along and see for yourself.” Right from the very start of his ministry, Jesus seems to understand that folks like to see for themselves. Jesus constantly invites folks to follow him throughout the short years of his ministry. Jesus seems to be all about collecting disciples and followers. He makes a repeated point to invite us to come and see.

Seeing is believing for so many of us and one of the ways that we come to faith is by seeing for ourselves so we can come to believe more fully. Much of the literature about confirmation of young people focuses on the idea that we invite young people to look over our shoulders and catch faith. Coming to faith is all about inviting others to come and see for themselves about what they believe so we can all build up our own and each other's faith.

Do you remember who brought you to faith? Can you think back and remember who the people were who helped you build faith? I remember one woman who influenced me very early in my faith journey. Her name was Gussie Harrison and she was the kindergarten teacher at the South Congregational Church in Concord, New Hampshire where I grew up. I had the privilege of serving as a teacher's aide with Gussie and I did have that experience of looking over the shoulder not only of a woman of deep and abiding faith but also looked over the shoulder of a master teacher.

Most of us don't come to faith all at once, in the blink of an eye, in a flash of light.

Most of us come to faith as a gradual process, a building up of our faith brick by brick, story by story, or testimony by testimony.

In this church's confirmation program both this year and last, we have invited adults to serve as mentors with our high school freshmen confirmands. The basis of this mentoring process is not based on the idea that these adult mentors know all the answers about faith. Rather these adult mentors agree to invite these young people to "look over the shoulders" as an adult other than their own parents, so that these young people might "catch" faith for themselves. By sharing the stories of our faith journeys together, we all grow. We invite these young people to walk with us on our journey of faith and let them "catch" a little of our faith. I am still seeking a few mentors for this year's class of confirmands. Inviting a young person into that journey can be a growing experience. Think about it! If you would like to offer to be a mentor with one of this year's teens I would very much like to hear from you.

We come to faith and we build our faith in so many different ways. One way is by hearing the testimonies of others. On Thursday night I attended a production at Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven on the second night of a world premiere play both written and acted by actress Anna Deavere Smith. The play is called *Let Me Down Easy*. (You may remember Anna Smith from her role as the African American national security advisor on the TV series *West Wing*.)

Anna Deavere Smith's play is a tribute to the idea of hearing the testimonies of others. This production is the culmination of a ten-year process of personal one-on-one interviews with folks from a huge array of fields: medical research, medical practice, bioethics, visual arts, sports, politics, storytelling, education, and the media. The focus of this amazing play is on both the human body and its resilience and vulnerability in the face of the many forces that affect and impact it.

In her interviews, Anna Deavere Smith invited folks to reflect out of their own journeys, their own life's work, and their faith lives about how they have used their body and how, when attacked by violence or disease, they have struggled with their bodies and their spirits. This is a one-person show. Anna herself takes on each of these roles of the persons she interviewed. This play shares the testimonies of about 30 different people—only 10% of the interviews she did! Each monologue is based on the actual interviews she had with each person.

On the stage she assumes each role in rapid succession. She turns and adds a jacket or a tie, a scarf or another pair of shoes. She changes her posture and her voice with each new role. She picks up a purse or puts on a wedding band, or picks up a trumpet or changes accents. Like Jesus in his ministry, she invites the audience to "come along and see for yourself". She invites us to look at what each of these characters has to say about the power of the human body and the power of the human spirit.

She becomes the cyclist Lance Armstrong as he shares how he motivates himself to take on the challenges of an athlete and as a cancer survivor. She becomes the mother of a five-year old son who battles leukemia. She becomes a doctor at Yale New Haven Hospital who struggles with some of the limitations of the current health care model of medicine and some of the

failures of the health care system. She becomes a jazz musician who came through hurricane Katrina and whose trumpet plays a mournful tune called “Let Me Down Easy” as a tribute to how he feels about the devastation after the floods. She becomes the super-model Veronica Webb who talks about how she has always been an object of prey for men in this culture because of her physical appearance. She becomes a traditional faith healer in Uganda trying to mix old traditions and new ideas. She becomes a survivor of genocide in Rwanda. She becomes the different faces of those who live and struggle when the body is attacked by other human beings, when the body is hit by forces like hurricane Katrina or by warfare. She embodies those whose bodies battle illnesses like cancer and HIV-AIDS.

In an amazing acting feat, this actress invites us to look over her shoulder at each of these persons and she pieces together their stories into a cohesive whole. This is a play about achievement and imagination and bravery and faith. A few of the statistics the playbill lists are these facts: There are over 10 billion (10,000,000,000,000) cells in the human adult body; there are over 10 million (10,000,000) living Americans who have or have had cancer; there were over 1,000 casualties from hurricane Katrina.

Our scriptures from both Old and New Testament today remind us to stay alert and to keep our eyes wide open because God has invited each of us to be God’s servant on this good earth in this one life we have to live. As Christians we believe that Jesus does invite each of us to “come along and see for yourself”.

It is not enough to have a comfortable and comforting church where we preach to each other the grace of God in Christ, where we pray for each other, where we serve each other, and where we share each other’s joys and sorrows. That is not enough!

We exist to bring God’s light to the world. Let us celebrate that we may delight in this life to do the will of God. Let us celebrate that we may share the grace upon grace that is heaped upon us. Let us behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and let us go out and share our faith with those hungry for the Word. Amen.

