

“What Are You Looking For?”

John 1: 35 – 42

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It was a seemingly innocent question. Or was it? Maybe it was just the opposite, meant to catch them off guard, cut deep, open both eyes and hearts to “Godly” seeing.

“What are you looking for?” What *are* you looking for?

Today is the second Sunday after the Epiphany, when we celebrated the bright shining of the star. We’ve changed the paraments, (the pulpit and lectern cloths) from the shimmering white to the green of what is known as “Ordinary time”. And yet these days are far from ordinary, as in ‘normal’, as in ‘common’, as in ‘every day’. Because even though our colors have gone from white to green, our scriptures for these weeks continue to lift up the theme of Epiphany; God’s light, through Jesus, shining brightly in the world for all to see. And so on this Sunday in Ordinary time that is not so ordinary, we hear what may seem to be an ordinary question but is so much more.

“What are you looking for?”

It was ‘the next day’; the day after John the Baptist had witnessed to the identity of Jesus and told everyone that he, John, had baptized him and could indeed testify that this one was ‘the Son of God’! John had told those standing around that when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended and remained on/abided in him. As scholar Fred Craddock wrote, the phrase was more than just a hint of location; “the point is that Jesus and the Holy Spirit have no ‘come and go’ relationship. No, the Spirit remained on him, he was ‘the permanent bearer of the Spirit, and his life carried the quality, knowledge and power which that implied.” (Preaching Through the Christian Year, Craddock, p. 89) Hold on to those words, ‘remain, abide, rest on’; they appear again shortly.

The next day, as John and two of John’s disciples were hanging out together, Jesus – this permanent bearer of the Spirit – walked by and John excitedly pointed him out, “Look! The Lamb of God!” Remember, we are in the gospel of John, the gospel of metaphor, we’re not 100% certain about this metaphor’s meaning; it most likely points to the sacrificial lamb of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Passover lamb. What we do know is that John did not throw out that term to mean ‘cute and cuddly’. The disciples knew this and we can almost see in our mind’s eye their eyes becoming as wide as saucers, “There he is! That’s the one, that’s the one who our teacher John was talking about, the one filled with the Holy Spirit, he’s...he’s walking right by us!” They dropped what they were doing and followed him.

That’s all we’re told, ‘they followed him’. What does that look like to you? Maybe a sort of mesmerized zombie walk? Maybe in military step? To me, I see two star struck (as in celebrity dazed) men, tripping over themselves and each other, keeping a bit of a distance out of sheer awe. And Jesus, looking over his shoulder, ‘hmm, yep, they’re still back there’, then turns and asks them, “What are you looking for?”

Not “Why are you following me?” Not “Who are you looking for?” Not “What are you doing?” but “What are you looking for?”

In just a couple of paragraphs we learn the identity of these two disciples. But for now, the gospel writer has not yet named them. Their identity is hidden. Could be anybody. It could be a question posed to all disciples, to those early followers, even to us. Could we be one of the disciples yet to be named? Could our name be there? Can we imagine Jesus turning to us and asking “What are you looking for?”

Those of us who have set our feet on the path to follow Jesus, what are we looking for? Comfort? Direction? Community? Purpose? Salvation – in this world or the next?

I wonder what our answer would be if we suddenly came face to face with the Son of God and he asked us, “What are you looking for?” Would we do the same as those early disciples, answering the question with a question of our own, “Teacher, where are you staying?” Not wanting to go where Jesus was asking, perhaps not knowing (do we every really know?), not able to answer, deflecting the question to something more tangible. (How ‘bout them Cats?!) It reminds me of the words from Ruth Duck on the opening page of her book “Touch Holiness”; that ‘we would rather exchange fellowship than touch holiness’.

“What are you looking for?” Oh, I really don’t know, haven’t thought about it much, not sure I want to think about it so instead, tell me Jesus, where are you staying?

That was their answer, “Where are you staying?”

Jesus responds to their question with an answer just as ambiguous as their answer to his, “Where are you staying?”. He answers, “Come and see.” Not “Oh, over a couple of streets and then down at the house with the goats tied out front”. “Come and see”. (Remember, we are in the gospel of John. If you are wanting stories with more specifics or direct answers, you may want to flip back to Mark’s gospel.)

“Come and see”, words that are both an invitation and an examination for those same disciples who follow. And they went and they saw...what did they see? If you read on in John, you will learn that these two saw...

A wedding in Cana where water was turned into wine; they saw the power of God at work in Jesus and God’s abundance at work in the world.

They saw Jesus in a rage, turning over the moneychanger’s tables in the temple, they saw this one of God angry over injustices

They saw the Lamb of God speaking with a Samaritan woman at a well, counseling a Pharisee to be born anew, they saw healing and feeding five thousand hungry on a hillside. They saw the light of the world!

And they remained with him. That same word as before; this was not just a ‘come and go’ relationship!

In this short story, we are given words with more than one meaning. “What are you looking for?” ‘To look’ can be with the eyes; to gaze upon, or, it can be from that deep place of searching, that deep place of discernment.

And similar to ‘looking’, Jesus invites them (and us) to ‘come and see’. To see with one’s eyes or to see with one’s heart; to perceive, discern, discover.

Come, follow me and discover; discover what you are looking for, what your heart is longing for, discover meaning in your ordinary day and purpose in your life; discover the Holy; that which is good, which is light, which is love. Come and discover that you are beloved, a child of God!

And they followed, and they remained with him. And their lives were transformed. We learn later in the passage that one of the disciples was Andrew. Tradition has it that St. Andrew was martyred by crucifixion. Maybe he found what he was looking for and was willing to die for it.

Sometimes what we are looking for and what Jesus shows us are not quite the same. We may be looking for how to take care of our own but then Jesus invites us to come and see and we see God’s love that reaches out to the world. We may be looking for security but in Jesus we see a life that involves taking risks. We may be looking for getting even but in Jesus we see a God of forgiveness and mercy. We may be looking for power or prestige but in Jesus we see humility. We may be looking for financial security as in what today is known as ‘the prosperity gospel’, if you are rich that is because God has blessed you with that money – but in Jesus, that kind of thinking is NOWHERE around. We may be looking for how to justify ‘us’ verse ‘them’ but when Jesus says come and see, we see all people as children of God.

Following Jesus. A friend and colleague from the Northwest recently wrote about those of us who follow Jesus are “followers of the counter-culture, anti-empire, non-violent, all inclusive man of Nazareth.”

I wonder if in his early years, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. knew what he was looking for. Did the ‘what’ change as he grew in faith and stature? At some point in young Martin’s life he heard an invitation from Jesus to ‘come and see’ and he followed and remained, his was not a ‘come and go’ relationship with the living Christ. That relationship held him up, guided his steps and shaped his words. His Christ pointed him toward a God of immeasurable love. Hear his words, “I refuse to accept the view that mankind (sic) is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become reality...I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

And we know the famous quote, “hate does not cast out hate, only love can do that.” I don’t know what Dr. King was looking for as he set out, but what he discovered was a Jesus who pointed to a God of love.

In this season of Light in the darkness, we celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. one who, like John the Baptist, pointed us toward the true light. It was Dr. King's faith that compelled him to follow a path that was for him the Way; the way of peace with justice for all of God's children. His was not a life of security, safety, riches, comfort. But in the end, I really don't think that's what he was looking for.

What are you looking for? Sit with that question for awhile this week. And also hear the invitation to 'come and see'. 'Come and see' a God who is at work in the world still, a light that shines in the darkness. Come and see a Jesus who points to a God who reaches out most to the lost and the least, who requires us to do the same, come and see a Jesus who cut his teeth on the prophets of old who told us what is required; to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.