

“What are you looking for?”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, January 26, 2020
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Scripture: John 1:29-42

The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, **“What are you looking for?”** They said to him, “Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter). John 1:29-44

Will you pray with me. God of wonder and surprise and descending doves, help us to see Jesus as you would have us see him. Help us to understand the power of your Spirit as it descends on each of us this day. Amen.

It is good for us to be here together this morning! It’s that time of the year in Maine when we never know whether the weather will keep us from gathering, so I appreciate it when we can gather.

WHY do we come here on Sunday mornings? (get responses) I believe we come to be with one another in community for an hour or so, to pray and sing together, to get the news of what’s going on in the church and in town, to hear a sermon – hopefully one which brings you some glimpse of the God of your faith, or to just get out of the house and get a breath of fresh air on your way here. But above all, I hope you come for an encounter with God – the God, who speaks to those of us who are Christians, through the person and the divine being of Jesus.

Our text from the Gospel of John this morning speaks of Jesus in many forms. John tries to communicate who Jesus is by calling him the Lamb of God, the Son of God, Rabbi, the Messiah, the one who takes away sin, the pre-existent one, the bearer of the Holy Spirit. What a rich witness to God and Jesus, as the Christ, we hear in our passage from the Gospel of John this morning!

The description of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist, and the descending of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus in the form of a dove, is told by all four of the Gospel writers, but John’s telling of the story is very different from the other three.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the story of Jesus' baptism in the *third* person. John puts his telling of the story in the framework of John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus. John speaks in the *first* person. John testifies, "*I saw* [emphasis added] the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I MYSELF [emphasis added] have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." (Jn 1:31-34)

What a difference in the telling of the story when it comes in the first person witness of John the Baptist! What a difference in one's faith when encounters with Jesus and with God come in the first person. Do you know anybody who has had one of those encounters? Have you? I have, but that's a sermon for another day....

This morning I'd rather focus on Jesus' question to the two unsuspecting disciples of John the Baptist. These two fishermen chose to follow him without even so much as a minimal background check to find out who this young guy was!

Jesus says to them, "What are you looking for?" They say to him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Jesus responds, "Come and see." Would you have followed him that easily and quickly? I don't think I would have. You can't be too careful, you know.... His motive for questioning them might not have been an honorable one!

In the original Greek of this text, the verb Jesus uses doesn't mean, "What information are you trying to find out?" or "What favor do you want?" or "What do you demand?" or even "What do you need?" The verb Jesus uses implies a search for something hidden. As in, "What do you seek?" or "What do you worship?" or "What do you desire?"

And the two disciples respond, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" I find this a very interesting and fascinating response to Jesus' question. If I asked you, "What do you seek?", would YOU respond, "Susan, where are you staying?" My guess is you wouldn't. You might say, "Gee, I don't know. I never really thought about it." Or you might say, "What do you mean, what do I seek?" But you probably wouldn't say, "Susan, where are you staying?" Unless... what you REALLY wanted to say was, "Can we go somewhere for coffee and talk?"

Perhaps the two disciples were taken aback and startled by Jesus' question or astonished that John had called Jesus "the Lamb of God," which made no sense at all to them. Perhaps they were curious beyond belief about this Jesus and anxious to find out more about him before they revealed anything about themselves.

Jesus responds wisely, "Come and see." (Jn1:39) What an open invitation Jesus gives these two disciples. He could simply have said, "I'm staying with my cousin, John the Baptist," or "I'm staying down by the river," or "I'm staying in Galilee." But he invited them to "come and see" where he was staying.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Bible to me is the questions.... And the responses to the questions are usually fascinating, too. In pastoral ministry I have been taught to ask open-ended questions and to respond in such a way as to give people room to answer in a variety of ways, to give them thinking and feeling space. Jesus was a master pastoral minister. "What are you looking for?" "Come and see."

Andrew and Simon Peter were fishermen. Perhaps all they were seeking in life was a good catch of fish everyday so they could feed their families. Perhaps they were looking for security, that undefinable feeling that everything will be o.k. Perhaps they were looking for peace, “for something to enable them to live at peace with themselves, and at peace with God and at peace with others.”¹

SOMETHING caused them to drop everything and follow Jesus. Perhaps it was the way he LOOKED at them, the SOUND of his voice, the way he MOVED, the INTENSITY of his manner. What causes YOU to follow Jesus? Some days I know exactly why I follow him and other days I don’t have a clue. I’ve probably mentioned this definition of faith before, but it’s worth repeating. Sometimes I repeat it to myself several times a day. “Faith is not being sure where you’re going, but going anyway.” That’s theologian Fred Buechner’s definition. Andrew and Simon Peter certainly were not sure where THEY were going, but they went anyway. They followed when Jesus said, “Come and see.”

The writer of the Gospel of John wants to answer the question, “Why did God’s Son come to earth?” This Gospel was designed to convince people to believe in Jesus as God in human form. Andrew and Simon Peter believed in Jesus and acted upon their belief.

May WE respond to Jesus’ question, “What are you looking for?” and do the same. In coming months, after we have our Annual Meeting, now scheduled for the end of April, we’ll have opportunities to think about where we are going as a church, what traditions we want to uphold, and in what new ways we might want to live out our answers to Jesus’ question, “What are you looking for?” I hope you’re as excited about answering this question and taking this journey as I am.

Let the people say, “Amen.”

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, v. 1, p. 87, 1975.