

sermon-1/20/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“What Are You Looking For?”
John 1:29-42

What are you looking for? Whom are you looking for? Those two questions are very important for John’s gospel. Two of John the Baptist’s disciples are following Jesus in chapter one. Jesus turns to them and the first words out of the mouth of Jesus in John are “What are you looking for?”

As you might imagine, that question stops them dead in their tracks. They are not sure how to answer it. To be quite frank, I am not so sure any of us would be able to answer that question much better than they did. If you look at the text, they didn’t answer Jesus’ probing question. Instead they asked him another question. That’s a great technique when you are put on the spot.

After all, to truly answer that question is to reveal more about ourselves, what we value, what makes us tick, than perhaps we would want to reveal. How would you answer that question? The easy answer, the answer we think the Church wants to hear is, “I’m looking for God.” But, if we are more honest than that, my guess we would be that would not be the first thing out of our mouths.

What are you looking for in life? Health? Power? Financial security? Happiness? A partner to share your life with? Sexual satisfaction? Fame? Popularity? A good stock tip? Freedom from fear? A sense of purpose? A better job?

I suspect many of those things would be part of our list of what we are looking for. Some of us may honestly say we are looking for God, for what is sacred, for some glimpse into that great mystery we call God that can sustain us through the hard times.

It is a critical question to answer, and to keep answering at every stage of our journey through life. It is important because the answer to that question determines much of what follows in our journey.

As I have said, the first words out of the mouth of Jesus in John’s gospel are, “What are you looking for?” And the first words out of the mouth of the resurrected Christ are very similar. Mary Magdalene is grieving the death of Jesus after the crucifixion in chapter twenty. She finds an empty tomb but can’t quite believe anything other than someone must have stolen the body.

She is approached by someone she thinks must be the gardener. He asks her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” The answer to that question is also quite critical. If she is only looking for a corpse, than there is no hope. To look for a corpse confirms that the good die young. It acknowledges that the powers that be, the Empire, wins out all the time. Fear triumphs over love. But, if she is looking for the resurrected Christ, then the future is radically open.

Mary starts out looking for a corpse, but when her name is called, she sees differently. She recognizes the risen Christ. Names are very important in John's gospel. Names represent the essence of a person. When the risen Christ calls out Mary's essence, she is known, radically known. It is that being known that enables her to see. Our text for today also involves names. We shall get to that in a moment.

First, let's get back to that first question: What are you looking for? If our answer to that question involves things like: a connection with God, a deeper relationship with that holy mystery that gives life meaning; if it involves a search for the truth, then what? Where do we go from there?

Our text offers us three examples to follow: John the Baptist, Andrew and his buddy, and Peter. John the Baptist is an interesting role model. He says his calling is to prepare people to encounter God's Chosen One. The only trouble is, he has no idea who that person might be. He says, "I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

John just keeps plugging away, baptizing people, speaking prophetic words to Israel's leaders and Rome's henchmen. He felt called to prepare the way for the Messiah, but he had no idea who that would be. And somehow, in his faithfulness, God, in Christ, is revealed to him.

I suspect there are many in this room who can identify with John on this. We want an experience of God. We want something more than the surface realities of life, but we don't know where or how we can experience that. Our text says, just keep plugging away at what you sense God is calling you to do. It will be revealed. You will encounter Christ right in the midst of your life.

Interestingly, Jesus' baptism in John is so very different than in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. In those other gospels, the spiritual experience at the baptism was for Jesus. He hears the voice. It gives him a sense of purpose. But here in John, Jesus' baptism was for John the Baptist. We don't read about any voice from the heavens speaking to Jesus. Instead John sees God's spirit descend, like a dove. The revelation is to John and he can only share it with others.

He shares it with two of his disciples, our next role models. One is called Andrew. We never hear the name of the other. John points them to Jesus, and they follow. They want to know where Jesus is staying, where he is abiding, where he can be found. Jesus says, "Come and see."

One scholar says that phrase is more literally, "Keep coming and you will see." In other words, keep following me, abiding with me, and your eyes will be opened to a reality, a relationship that will give you meaning.

Those of us who want a deeper relationship with God must take the risk of being a follower of Jesus. We may have to leave old mentors, old patterns of making meaning,

old comfort zones, to be able to follow Jesus. If we have the courage to do that, we will find what we are looking for. We will find our deepest hopes. And when we do, we can't help but share it with those in whom we care.

Andrew immediately shares his discovery with his brother Simon. Simon comes to Jesus, and is given a new name. Like Mary Magdalene being called by her name enabling her to see more clearly, Simon is given a new name. He is given a clue that he will not be the same person when he follows Jesus.

We have come to see the name Peter as a common name in our day. Commentators, however, tell us that was not the case in Jesus' day. When he tells Simon he will be called Peter, it was rather weird. The name is Cephas in Aramaic. Cephas is very similar to the Aramaic word for rock, kepha. The Greek for Peter is Petros, which also means rock, the kind of rock or stone soldiers used in combat.

Commentators say Peter was never a name used for a person in that day. It was an object. It would be like Jesus saying to someone today, Simon, you will be called "tree," or "dirt." Somehow Simon was going to change. He was going to become a rock, a spiritual force or weapon, so to speak, to storm the gates of hell.

If our answer to the question, "What are you looking for?" is a closer relationship with God, we better be prepared to see our lives change. I'm not talking about some little change. I am talking about our lives changing enough that we are not the same person as before. We might want to ask ourselves: Has my search for God been serious enough to require a name change?

What are you looking for? How has what you have given your life pursuing changed you? Has it touched you deep enough for you to want to share it with others? Have there been any epiphanies in your life that have made you see things differently? Those are the questions this season of Epiphany raises for us. Jesus says, "Keep coming and see." Let's do it. Amen