

## John 1:29-42: **What are you looking for?**

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One of our stalwart members mentioned this week that John the Baptist sure gets a lot of airtime this season. It's true.

During Advent we heard John challenge people to get ready for the coming of the Messiah.

On Christmas Eve we heard the gospel writer unfold the mystery of God coming to us with a human face. Those verses also described John the Baptist bearing witness to Jesus.

Now after Epiphany John blesses us once again. He's still out at the Jordan River baptizing people and causing a stir. So religious leaders from Jerusalem go ask John, "Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah?" John says no. Then he channels Isaiah and declaims, "I am a voice crying out in the wilderness, 'Make the Lord's path straight.'"

And that's where today's reading picks up. Listen for God's word to us from the Gospel of John, chapter 1 (CEB):

<sup>29</sup> The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup> This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.' <sup>31</sup> Even I didn't recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel." <sup>32</sup> John testified, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. <sup>33</sup> Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>34</sup> I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son."

<sup>35</sup> The next day John was standing again with two of his disciples. <sup>36</sup> When he saw Jesus walking along he said, "Look! The Lamb of God!" <sup>37</sup> The two disciples heard what he said, and they followed Jesus.

<sup>38</sup> When Jesus turned and saw them following, he asked, "What are you looking for?"

They said, "Rabbi (which is translated *Teacher*), where are you staying?"

<sup>39</sup> He replied, "Come and see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

<sup>40</sup> One of the two disciples who heard what John said and followed Jesus was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. <sup>41</sup> He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated *Christ*). <sup>42</sup> He led him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which is translated *Peter*).

What are you looking for?

I have climbed the highest mountains  
I have run through the fields  
Only to be with you

I have run, I have crawled  
 I have scaled these city walls  
 Only to be with you  
 But I still haven't found  
 What I'm looking for<sup>1</sup>

Those lyrics are from one of the best-known songs by the band U2. It's from 1987. The song became hugely popular, I think because it expresses a yearning so many of us feel — that desire for meaning, for connection, for something or someone to believe in.

John, the prophet baptizing people in the wilderness, didn't know exactly what he was looking for, but he knew he was called to prepare the way. So he did the work God called him to. And one day John encountered something new. "Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I, John, have seen and testified that this one is God's Son."

So John points out Jesus and says, "Look! The Lamb of God!" There goes God among us! These verses are the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is called the Lamb of God. Yet to this day when Christians celebrate communion we sing, "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." John's witness still echoes.

His words must have been powerful because two of John's own disciples immediately switch their loyalty and start following this new guy. They've found Teacher 2.0. Jesus turns around and probes their hearts: "What are you looking for?"

They say back, "Teacher, where are you staying?" Fascinating. What do you hear in that question? I hear them asking something like *Jesus, who are your people? Where do you like to hang out?* Jesus answers simply, "Come and see."

So they join him, getting to know not only this mysterious Lamb of God, but also the God-shaped beloved community that Jesus starts creating around him. This early experience makes Andrew tell his brother, "Hey, we found God's chosen one, the Messiah. You gotta come too."

This short scene shows us three different ways of getting to know Jesus:

- 1) hearing a preacher's testimony and acting on it (occasionally that happens),
- 2) encountering Jesus personally, and
- 3) being introduced by a loved one.<sup>2</sup>

People do not all follow the same pattern in coming to follow Jesus..

What are these first followers of Jesus looking for? Well, John's been on the lookout for the person who embodies God's Holy Spirit.

And there's a lot of pent-up expectation in Andrew's statement that "We have found *the Messiah*." Andrew has been looking for someone. He may be thinking of a new king for Israel, one to liberate Israel from Roman occupation.

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<sup>1</sup> U2. "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." *The Joshua Tree*. 1987.

<sup>2</sup> This point made by Lamar Williamson in his book *Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004. p. 17.

But deeper than politics we get a glimpse of religious desire: a yearning for God to be present and with us in the world.<sup>3</sup> Humans are “looking for the presence of God in a real, tangible, ‘fleshly’ way; for the author of [this gospel], coming to know and understand [God’s] presence in the here and now is to find eternal life.”<sup>4</sup>

Andrew may not yet understand exactly who he’s found, but a brief encounter with Jesus is enough to reorient his life — he stays where Jesus is staying. It also inspires Andrew to find his brother and repeat Jesus’ words, “Come and see!”

A few chapters later a Samaritan woman will have a long conversation with Jesus and afterward *she’ll* go preach to her entire town, “Come and see! Could this man be the Christ?”

This invitation to *come and see* keeps coming to us, wherever and whenever we are in our faith journeys. You may find that what you are looking for changes. Our questions evolve. Some of them get answered. And new questions arrive. Being called into discipleship is not a one-time decision but an evolving relationship.

I have spoke with the tongue of angels  
 I have held the hand of a devil  
 It was warm in the night  
 I was cold as a stone  
 But I still haven't found  
 What I'm looking for

Sometimes in a faith journey we know what we’re looking for. And sometimes we’re not fully aware of what we seek — until we are confronted with it.

About 20 years ago I was in seminary. I was looking for whether I might be called to teach, or possibly to pastor. So I worked on learning Hebrew and Greek. I wrestled with writing papers about theology. I tried to remember the outlines of church history for my exams. My then-marriage was also crumbling, and I felt anxious and depressed, close to despair. I desperately needed to find spiritual refreshment, so one summer I signed up for a weeklong contemplative retreat out in Oregon.

That experience did begin to heal me. I learned ways to pray that were centuries old yet new to me. I hiked in the ancient woods and watched the sun go down behind the mountains. I experienced a quiet and supportive community surrounding me. Our retreat leaders encouraged us to pay attention to our bodies: breathing, eating, moving, resting. So when I was offered the chance to sign up for an hour of massage, I took it.

As the therapist worked on my back and legs and shoulders I perceived the serious tension my body had been carrying. Her firm and deliberate massage started releasing those clenched muscles, letting them move freely again. Then the therapist did the same thing for my arms. As she got down to one of my hands, she loosened the tension in my palm for a while, then she slipped her hand through mine to start working on my fingers.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> Phillips, Buran. “John 1:35-42: Theological Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 1*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015. p. 34.

At that instant something loosened — in my heart. My eyes spontaneously pooled with tears. I was startled by the power of that simple act of another human being interlacing fingers with mine. In that moment I found something I didn't know I was looking for: gentleness, care, a flash of human connection. My heart had felt as stressed as my body, and it too needed to unclench.

That massage therapist was just doing her job well. But her attentive, detailed work helped to heal my spirit as well as my body. Never underestimate the power each of us been given. One small word or one simple gesture may convey more Christlike grace than you'll ever realize, thanks be to God. What you can offer might turn out to be exactly what someone else is looking for.

Recently I witnessed this church family come alongside Ron Mikulak as his life drew to a close. Offerings of love ranged from doing household chores to adopting beloved paintings to reading Ron's favorite poetry to him even when he could no longer respond. I pray that every dying person might experience God's tangible presence like that.

I believe in the Kingdom Come  
 Then all the colors will bleed into one  
 But yes, I'm still running  
 You broke the bonds  
 And you loosed the chains  
 Carried the cross of my shame  
 You know I believe it  
 But I still haven't found  
 What I'm looking for

Soon after that song came out a cousin of mine got a chance to meet Bono, the singer who wrote those words. My cousin asked Bono how he could both profess Christian faith and also say he still hasn't found what he's looking for. Whatever answer Bono gave did not satisfy my more literalist cousin.

But that song has continued playing in my heart all these years. It's the story of faith and doubt. It's the experience of following Jesus while he still beckons us on, saying, "Come and see." It's the dance of the already and the not yet. Yes, I already believe, and my hope in God is not yet completed.

What are you looking for? What are we as a church looking for? "There is life to be found in the one who journeys with us."<sup>5</sup> Jesus says, Come and see.

In the name of the One bringing Kingdom Come,  
 the One who calls disciples,  
 and the One descending like a dove.

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford, Joseph J. "John 1:35-42: Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 1*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015. p. 36.