

“What are you looking for?”

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey 1/20/08
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA)

Text: John 1:29-42 The next day he 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 have 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).

I ENVY PEOPLE who know without a shadow of a doubt that they have found Jesus, who unequivocally know that they are God’s beloved from birth, that God is in charge, that all is right with their spiritual world and their direction in life.

During all the times in my life of faith that I have dared God to show up and prove that there is more to faith than my needy imagination, I yearn for the “I-found –it- that- settles- it” kind of faith, the faith that is often grounded in a particular experience or revelation. In this sense, John the Baptist is a sort of a prototype.

In the first part of this passage from the fourth gospel, John the Baptist “finds” Jesus, in one glorious instantaneous moment. Granted John has been preparing for this moment all his life. Granted God has previously told him to look for the sign of the descending of a dove. Nonetheless, when the dove of the Holy Spirit finally does descend on Jesus, John knows. Absolutely and unequivocally, he knows that this Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

My faith journey hasn’t been as direct. I am more like those two disciples in the second half of our reading. They are already doing something else. They are already serving as disciples of John - probably invested in the pecking order, comfortable with their job description, dependent upon their support system, and not terribly anxious to upset the apple cart. Yet in the midst of their perfectly predictable lives, John himself piques their curiosity. Not their commitment. Not their conviction. Just plain old curiosity. Their ears pick up when they hear “Lamb of God.” They recognize this vivid image as an allusion to the suffering servant and the sacrificial lamb language of Isaiah and the psalms, language that has always hinted at the coming of the Messiah. Who is this man Jesus? What does he have to offer? What, if anything, can he tell us about the purpose of life?

Some of the greatest heroes of the Christian faith started their faith journey in this very same way. St. Augustine spent years wandering, intellectually and spiritually, indulging in every appetite of the flesh, until he finally committed his soul to God. He was never absolutely certain in his head, but somehow he was willing to trust his heart. Finally he could pray, "O Lord our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee. "

GK Chesterton was a feisty frenetic journalist who set out to disprove the orthodoxy of the Christian faith – only to find himself years later embracing the very thing he had tried to demolish. Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson were both deists, Christian agnostics at best, never fully embracing the mysteries of miracles or the reality of resurrection. Yet both of them became convicted enough by the ethical ideals of the Sermon on the Mount that they committed their wills to what their minds could never fully grasp.

When John's two curious disciples begin to follow Jesus, Jesus turns to them and meets them where they are. He doesn't proselytize, push, manipulate, control, judge, or punish. Instead he engages them, asking a question that gets to the heart of our human experience. "What," he asks, "are you looking for?" Encouraged by his approachability, his humanness, his openness, Andrew and his friend ask Jesus a question of their own: "Where are you staying?" A give and take relationship has begun. Jesus responds, "Come and see." The new disciples do go and do see and they end up staying with Jesus all day, and then for the rest of their lives.

Stay. Remain. Rest. Abide: all these are crucial words in the gospel of John; all derivatives of the Greek *memo*; all indicating an intimate togetherness, over time, in the presence of one another's company; all allowing experience and familiarity and trust to cement a relationship that the minds cannot even fathom. I think, this might be what faith means...an invitation to hang in there, to come and see. It begins in curiosity, it is rooted in companionship, it leads to commitment and conviction.

Subtle, emergent, flexible, flowing, Jesus is a journey toward the answer to that most important question of our lives, "What are you looking for?" It is not what do you want to do? What do you want to produce or achieve or prove? Is it not what do others expect you to do? No, the question is: "What are you looking for? What is important? What is it that will fill your life with purpose and joy and meaning?"

Acclaimed writer Chaim Potok was an intensely religious man, a Jew who explored the dimensions of faith in our lives. From an early age, Potok knew he wanted to be a writer. But his mother wasn't so sure. When he went away to college she said, "Son, now I know you want to be a writer. But I want you to think about brain surgery. You'll keep a lot of people from dying. And you'll make a lot of money." To which Potok responded, "No, Mama, I want to be a writer." But, "No" is not what Mama wanted to hear. So, every vacation break for four years she would repeat her comments about his becoming a brain surgeon and keeping people from dying and making a lot of money, and always his response was the same. Finally the son had enough, and, when the same mantra began, he cut off his mother with exasperation, and with great passion he told his mother, "Mama, I don't want to keep people from dying; I want to show them how to live."

This morning's Gospel lesson is a "call" story, but unlike so many call stories in scripture it is not crisp, dramatic, or decisive. There is no flashing light, no booming voice, no clear instruction as to

what the disciples are to do. Instead, what we hear is Jesus asking a question - a strange, penetrating question. But it is the question that forms the foundation for understanding "call," for understanding vocation. "What are you looking for?"

After struggle and discernment, Chaim Potok was able to answer this very particular question. He was looking for life - for abundant life for himself and others. Writing novels just happened to be the means for him to find it.

Faith, perhaps, is not so much a matter of thinking as doing; and not doing so much as being and witnessing. Just come and see, and we might realize that Jesus came to make us both more holy and more fully human. Just come and see, and we can comprehend the life and ministry of Jesus as the center of our own faith.

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "One midnight I asked God to tell me as plainly as possible what I was supposed to do. 'Anything that pleases you.' That is the answer that came into my sleepy head. 'What?' I said, waking up. 'What kind of answer is that?' 'Do anything that pleases you,' the voice said, 'and belong to me.' After that things became much simpler for Taylor. She could pump gas or clean out latrines. But as long as she remembered whose she was, her "calling" was a true one. And she realized that God calls us not once, but many times.

I think Lisa Larges would understand this. Most of you know her journey, nearly 23 years of pursuing an ordained call within the Presbyterian Church (USA). She will tell you that knowing Jesus is not about intellectual certainty; it is not about ethical perfection. It is not about somehow declaring that organized religion is the best thing since sliced bread. On the contrary, to know Jesus is to embark on a journey, to come and see, to abide, to hang out with him in worship and in Bible study and in homeless kitchens and in the ups and downs of very real, very messy church organizations. To hang out with Jesus is to stay the course and see what happens.

To follow Jesus—whether out of curiosity or conviction -- is to be a Christian. I do not believe that Christianity is the only way to find God. But I do know that it is the way that God has called me to follow, and may others. Christianity is not an idea, it is a lifestyle. It is not a destination, it is a journey. It is not a product, it is a process. It is not a routine, it is a relationship. It is not an individual thing, it is the life of community.

More than 40 years ago there was a man who heard a call from God and answered it. He heard God ask him, "What are you looking for?" and he was able to answer: "I am looking for freedom and justice for all of God's people." And so, Martin Luther King, Jr., was able to give voice to the voice of God through the voice of his own passion.

"I have a dream that is deeply rooted in the American dream ... I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. And then all of us will be free at last."

Did Martin King have that level of commitment when he first began his ministry? It's doubtful. He had youthful enthusiasm to be sure. He had strong convictions. He was well brought up, with an outstanding Baptist Preacher as a father. But people who are truly captured by the spirit of

Christ do so generally after years of walking in Christ's footsteps. Our faith is validated and grows as we "come and see."

Looking toward his own eventual death, Rev. King preached: "I'd like someone to say, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like someone to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to be able to say that I did try to visit those in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. I just want to leave a committed life behind."

My friends, what are you looking for? There's a Call waiting for you. It is by asking and answering that question, with Jesus as your companion, that you will hear God's "call" to you. And then, you, too, will be free at last.

Amen.

Rev. Kelsey is indebted to several sermons from the Rev. Susan Andrews for inspiration and illustrations.