

What are you looking for?

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John 1:35-42 — 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).

The Gospel of John is my favorite gospel. And actually, this is my first time preaching from it to you all. It's got some of my favorite stories about Jesus that aren't found anywhere else in the bible: the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet; the story of Jesus saving the life of a woman who was about to be stoned; the story of Thomas meeting the resurrected Jesus and seeing his fears and doubts melt away. The portrait of Jesus we get in this gospel is quite different from the other three. While all four of the gospels are more than just historical portraits, more than just a chronological account of events, the gospel of John seems to be especially...how shall we say... out there.

Here's one example: at the beginning of John's gospel, in chapter 2, we read a story in which Jesus cleanses the temple in Jerusalem. There are other versions of this story in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. You may very well know how it goes: Jesus walks into the temple and sees an established market: people are busy buying and selling things, and what is supposed to be a place of worship has become a shrine of commercialism. Apparently, Jesus doesn't like this one bit. So, he stages an impromptu protest, knocking money off of tables and driving out the buyers and sellers. Now, in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this story appears at the very end of Jesus' ministry, in the final week of his life. In the Gospel of John, however, the story appears right at the beginning, as I said, in chapter 2. And what makes this especially odd, at least at first, is that the Gospel of John was written years after the other three gospels, and many of the early readers of John would have already read at least one of the others — which raises the question: what is John doing, putting this story here at the beginning? Doesn't he, and all those who helped compile the book, know the proper order of events? Why would they contradict the other gospels? When John puts the story of Jesus cleansing the temple at the beginning of the book, rather than at the end, it tells us something: it tells us that those who compiled the gospel aren't primarily concerned with chronology. In short, they're not trying to write a history book here. Rather, they are trying to convey certain truths, to preach a message that is good news, to share the apostle John's own understanding of what God has done in the person of Jesus.

Each of the gospels shares a slightly different understanding of this Jesus. For me personally, John's Jesus is the most mysterious and the most intriguing. This morning, I want to focus on the first three things that Jesus says in the gospel of John, which are all here in our second reading: 1) "What are you looking for?"; 2) "Come and see"; and 3) "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Peter." As we briefly reflect on these three statements together, my hope is that each of us would be drawn further into the mystery and intrigue of who Jesus is.

First: "What are you looking for?" Fascinating first words from Jesus, don't you think? Compare them to Jesus' first words in, say, the Gospel of Mark. There, he says, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." That introduction seems a bit more messianic and lordly, don't you think? In the Gospel of John, however, we first meet Jesus not through an imposing proclamation, but through a direct question, addressed to the two disciples who are following him. At first, the answer to the question seems simple: The two disciples could just say, "Well, we're looking for *you*, Jesus! That is, in fact, why we are following you." But Jesus knows that the answer runs deeper than that. He knows that not everyone who follows him is looking for the same thing.

Some people who follow Jesus are looking for wisdom: they want a teacher — someone who will instruct them on how to live a good and fulfilling life. Other people who follow Jesus are looking for comfort: they want a shepherd — someone who will speak soothing words to them when they are in pain or afraid. Some people who follow Jesus are looking for social change: it is quite easy to invoke Jesus as support for various causes — from the extremely liberal to the extremely conservative. Other people are looking for pardon from sin: they follow Jesus because they know that they have made mistakes, and they trust that Jesus somehow redeems them. And some people, I'm sad to say, are simply looking for power: they follow Jesus because they want an authority to tap into. They want to stand on Jesus' shoulders and use his words to tell people what to do and what not to do. And then there are some of us who don't really know *why* we are following Jesus. We just always have, and I guess we haven't found anyone or anything better to follow.

Most of us, I imagine, can identify with each of these, at least to some extent and at some point in our lives. Some days, we're looking for one thing from Jesus; other days, we're looking for something else. And still other days, we don't know *what* we're looking for. I think that it's important, friends, to ask ourselves, again and again, "What do I think I'm getting out of following Jesus? What do I hope following Jesus will give to me?" If there's one thing that's certain about this Jesus, it's that he can be many different things to many different people. What is he for you these days?

When Jesus asks the two disciples what they're looking for, they respond by asking, "Where are you staying?" It seems that they don't quite know what exactly they're looking for yet. But what they do know is that they want more time with this Jesus. They long to be in his presence — to observe him and to walk alongside him. And Jesus welcomes this. His answer to their question,

his second statement in John's gospel, is "Come and see." Friends, Jesus always gives us permission to follow. He always invites us along for the ride. He doesn't expect you to have all of the answers at once. He doesn't demand that you be pure in heart, that you hone in on the one, right way of following Jesus or the one, right way of desiring God. You can be looking for different things, or not know what you're looking for, and still, you can come and see.

Just be ready. Be ready for Jesus to shake things up. Be ready for Jesus to search you and know you and change you. Be ready for Jesus to call you by a new name. His third statement in John's gospel is spoken to a man named Simon, whose brother Andrew has literally just brought him before Jesus. And no sooner has Simon been pushed into this mysterious man's presence than Jesus says to him "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas — Peter." It's really quite funny, I think. I mean, how would you feel if, just after meeting someone, they immediately tried to re-name you? Like, imagine you and I are meeting for the first time: you say, "Hi, Pastor William," and I say, "Your name is Pat. You are to be called, 'Rock'" — which, by the way, is what "Peter" means.

Expect the unexpected from Jesus, friends. Expect him to lay claim to things in your life that you didn't think were his to claim. Expect him to get to know you much more quickly than you are getting to know him. In this third and last statement, Jesus says to Simon, and to each of us, "I know who you are, and I know where you come from. And when you follow me, things change. Where you go, how you live, even what you call yourself can change. The Spirit of Jesus is still speaking, friends. The mystery and intrigue is alive and well. Come and see. Amen.