



COMMUNITY
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

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2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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John 1:29-42

What are you looking for?

Our New Testament lesson comes from John. Let us listen for God's word to us.

Two weeks ago on Epiphany Sunday, we heard the first spoken words in the Gospel of Matthew and they came in the form of a question. The Magi enter Jerusalem and ask, "Where is the child who is born king of the Jews?" In our Gospel text this morning we discover that the very first words Jesus utters in John are also a question. Jesus says, "What are you looking for?" There's nothing like a well-placed and well-timed question to get us thinking.

Jesus asks that question of two disciples of John the Baptizer who fall in behind him one day and tag along without saying anything. Jesus stops and asks them, "What are you looking for?" – the perfect question to aim at those who would follow him! What are we looking for in life? Why are we here?

Tough questions, with no easy, clear answers – and answers will be different for each one of us. Some of us seek security;

others are looking for hope; others, justice; others, health; others, simply light at the end of the tunnel. It's the right question to ask about our lives, as we go busily on our way into the future, often without pausing to reflect on the meaning of it all: what are we looking for?

The two men who were following Jesus respond with a question of their own: "Rabbi," they say, "Where are you staying?" They want to know where he will be, so that they can be there also. They are looking for Jesus. As we find our way into relationship with Jesus the question is ours as well "What are you looking for?" We may also respond, "Where are you? We are looking for you, Jesus."

The reply Jesus offers back to the fledgling disciples is an invitation to all those in every age who would seek to find and follow him. Jesus says, "Come and see." I view this exchange as a conversation about vocation

in life. What Jesus asks – "What are you looking for?" – is a vocational question. It has to do with what in the world we think we are doing with our lives. A good question, indeed, and if we have not asked it of ourselves recently, we should give it a try.

Vocation. It comes from the Latin word meaning to call. It refers to the work and the life that God invites us to undertake on this earth. That's what Jesus was asking his would-be disciples: what is your vocation? How will you serve our God? Where will you go and what will you do? What are you looking for in life?

Frederich Buechner's definition of calling is a favorite of mine: "The place God calls you to," he writes, "Is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." On this weekend when we remember and give thanks for the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that is a good way to think of him, as one who fully understood his vocation, as one whose deep gladness met the world's deep hunger.

We tend to remember King primarily as a civil rights leader, but he was first a Baptist preacher, a man with deeply held Christian commitment. When he spoke of his dream for America in 1963, he was making a theological statement about his personal vocation.

When he said, "I have a dream," he was saying, "God has called me to announce this good news". He saw that dream not only as his vocation, but that of the entire nation. It

is no less so for us as a people today. To speak of vocation is to dream about God's will for our lives and for our world. In the providence of almighty God, we believe that each one of us has a particular calling from God. That call begins with serving God and the cause of God's love and justice wherever we are and however and whenever we can.

The prophet Isaiah seems to have had a good grip on his life vocation. If he had been around, and Jesus had asked what he was looking for, he would have been prepared to respond. "What am I looking for?" he would say. "Nothing other than justice for all God's people, sight for the blind, healing for the sick, release for the captives, hope for the poor and oppressed. That's what I'm looking for."

The text from Isaiah today startles us in the way it speaks so clearly of life purpose, of vocation. The prophet writes, "Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb God named me." Isaiah envisions himself as an arrow in the quiver of God, ready to be used to speak of righteousness to a people not eager to hear. Through the voice of the prophet God will announce good news not only to Israel but even to the world beyond: "I will give you as a light to the nations," God says to the prophet, "that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Isaiah sees himself as predestined prior to his birth to take on the vocation of prophet

to the people of God. Isaiah describes God as the one “who formed me in the womb to be his servant.” The prophet sounds like a Presbyterian with all his talk of predestination, the notion that God has a calling for us even before we are born. We don’t hear much about Calvin’s peculiar notion these days. It has been relegated to the category of obscure theological idea, as a kind of embarrassment to us. There is the time old predestination story about the Presbyterian who walks up the steps one day, trips and falls, and says, “Boy am I glad to get that over with!” But that isn’t the heart of the idea. Isaiah got it right: God does have desires for our life, a calling for us, before we have the slightest idea. Our lifelong work is to discern and follow that calling, and I do not mean only in ordained ministry but wherever we do our work.

Predestination is a fancy way of saying that God has designs on you and me before we even know there is a God. We are not entirely self-determined, as we like to think. It then really becomes an exciting way to look at our lives if we can understand that “You did not choose me,” as Jesus says, “but I chose you.”

Another word we use to describe this theological reality is election. We are elected, chosen, predestined – not for the little things, like whether or not we’ll get a green light at the next intersection – but for the big things. God chooses us for salvation, that is, the life to come, and for service, life in the here and now.

God chooses us and calls us to life in a certain direction, and that direction is justice and love. When Jesus asks us, “What are you looking for?” he wants us to examine ourselves and seek out God’s calling. “Come and see,” he says, “Your vocation lies with me.”

John Calvin put it this way in the 16th century: “Each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.” In short, each one of us is called to make a difference somehow, somewhere in this world, wherever God places us.

There’s a fair amount of what Calvin called “heedless wandering about through life” that goes on among us these days. We hear it in the search for meaning among people that are at the point of asking what their life has meant. Or among people who do not want to become simply mindless consumers, but somehow to make a contribution to the world. Or in the lives of those who sense that they are being left out of it all by “the system.”

“What are you looking for?” Jesus asks, and he’s speaking to us about the deeper direction of our life. Life’s meaning arises from our vocation; for us, that means following Jesus, who calls us to make a difference on this earth. Amen.