

Sermon: What are you looking for?

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Scriptures: 1 Cor 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

I know you all don't usually think of me as a local and for good reason: I'm not a local. I come to Manchester via Ellicott City by way of Arkansas, Germany, and Pennsylvania. But I was born a Marylander and spent seven years here before my family moved to the town affectionately called "E-Town" in Lancaster County, PA. When we moved to E-town, we found ourselves situated next door to the family of precocious little four-year-old called Annie, who would become my best childhood friend. I've spoken of her before, but for those of you who don't know, Annie was curious, adventurous, and a whole lot of fun. But before I knew her as any of those things, I knew her as my first evangelist!

A four-year-old evangelist? Yes, that's right. Annie came to visit my brother and me with her family. Memory tells me that we sat and played somewhere in our house and that in the midst of playing together she asked, "Do you know Jesus?" I remember thinking it was an odd question. Yes, I'd heard of Jesus, but did I know the guy? Nope! Over the years that I knew Annie, we grew closer and I saw exactly how much influence and power faith in Jesus Christ can have. When Annie was diagnosed with a rare leukemia a few years later, her childlike faith sustained her through most of it. When she passed away, it was her faith that pushed me to welcome Jesus into my orbit of awareness and to change my life for the better. Without Annie's invitation in the form of that simple question, I really don't know if I could be a pastor right now, let alone *your* pastor.

This week, as I stepped back into the day-to-day reality of pastoring after vacation, I found myself a bit overwhelmed. Some of this probably had to do with putting my wife back on a plane to the UK on Monday, but I think it's true that re-entry after a break can be tough for anyone, not just American pastors who are married to UK citizens. The great thing, though, about re-entering after the holiday season is that the lectionary drops us down into the exciting journey of the epiphany: the revelation of Jesus Christ as the embodiment of God's love for the world.

As tough as the week started, I found myself energized by the texts before me as I planned our worship. Today, we find ourselves amid a string of Sundays in which our scriptural conversation is situated around this bright, shining new thing that has happened in the world and its immediate aftermath. God-Among-Us is being revealed to the world in all sorts of new ways. Each week leading up to Lent is a week in which we are finding out another way in which the significance of Jesus is uncovered. The way our lectionary is structured, this really is the gospels building the case for Jesus as God incarnate.

It would be hard to believe this fantastical account of the Savior of the World as a lowly babe in a manger *if not for* the events that occur *after* the birth. It's not just his birth that is special, it's what follows that makes a difference for all of us. Sure, Mary and Joseph are aware their lives are changed in an instant, but the rest of us are going to need some time to catch up. So far, we've seen some of Luke and Matthew's case for the Messiah made manifest through his birth to Mary and Joseph, through his reveal to the wise men from the east, and through God's inbreaking to the world during his baptism as the Holy Spirit descends from above.

This week, we turn to the gospel according to John and John is going to approach this a bit differently as John tends to do. You know, I saw a commentary this week that recalled the old Sesame Street sketch that showed four items while a guy sang, “One of these things is not like the other, one of these things doesn’t belong...” If we made a church sketch using the four gospels and tried to select which one of these things was not like the others before the end of the song, it would be John’s gospel without question that’s the oddball. The gospel of John doesn’t spend anytime talking about Jesus’s birth, he tells of his baptism only in hindsight, and records not a single parable. What’s great about John, however, is that he doesn’t just give us the “what” of Jesus’s ministry, but also spends time with the “whys.” It is John’s gospel who really offers us commentary on the significance of Jesus in the big picture and great insight into what’s happening, just as he does here with that wild-baptizing-man of the wilderness, John the Baptist, as well as Jesus, and the first disciples.

Our reading for today in John chapter 1 begins with John the Baptist’s recollection of Jesus’s baptism. As Jesus approaches John one day, John spontaneously seems to break out into a recitation on this great “man who ranks ahead of me because he came before me.” As I picture this scene in my mind, John’s overt display almost takes on the energy of a musical in which one character spontaneously breaks out in emotional show for another. I imagine John in his camel’s hair clothes, fueled by locusts and honey, dancing around among his disciples, literally singing Jesus’s praises. I’m not saying that’s what happened here, but the text doesn’t say *how* John “declares” and “testifies,” so the image of John’s possible musical exuberance stays with me.

But I digress. John declares Jesus as the Son of God, testifying that he witnessed the Spirit descend upon him as he baptized him in the River Jordan. The next day, we're told that Jesus again crosses John's path and John can't help but exclaim (that's the word used in the NRSVue translation, "exclaim"), "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" And what's more, John's enthusiastic declarations do not fall on deaf ears. He's so excited about this new thing that he can't help but inspire a some of John's own disciples to follow Jesus. John's like a little boy with a new toy—he'll make you excited about it whether you want to be or not!

When these men approach Jesus and begin to follow, a peculiar thing occurs. Jesus turns to them and says, "What are you looking for?" Their response? Well, it's not much of a response. They say, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" This is a bit personal, don't you think? Asking where someone is staying? Were I Jesus, I'd be suspicious about why they're asking. And yet, rather than being suspicious or even affronted by this question or questioning their boundary awareness, Jesus simply issues an invitation: "Come and see."

What are you looking for? Come and see.

The disciples visit the place where Jesus is staying and, the text tells us, they hang around with him all day. One of those disciples, Andrew, goes on to invite his brother—the one who will become known as Peter—to meet Jesus. He tells him they have found the Messiah and and Peter needs to come and see. The rest, we could say, is history, because as we all well know: Peter will go on to become the rock on whom Jesus builds his church.

Now, my next question about this text is a complex one: what is this power that Jesus has to attract people to his message? Certainly, it is divine and is perhaps a power we don't really have. But it is also very human, isn't it? John the Baptist goes before Jesus to prepare the way. He is so exuberant and excited by the existence of this man and what he means to the world, that his message about Christ's message entices, draws in, attracts in the best possible way curiosity, interest, questions, excitement. And it's not just John that brings the human element to Jesus's strange attraction. It's Jesus, himself. Because Jesus isn't simply strolling through places and drawing people to him like a moth to flames—rather, he's actively bringing them to him either through the example he sets *or* as is the case here, through the simple act of invitation.

“What are you looking for?” he asks. “Come and see.”

Jesus invites the disciples into his mission and ministry. Jesus exhibits a curiosity about those whom he invites. Jesus sees that they are seeking something. He asks them what that is. And then he invites them to come and see what he's all about. Without that invitation, would Andrew and the others have continued to follow? Would they have felt welcome to do so? There are a lot of people in my life that have interested me, who I've wanted to learn from or better understand, but haven't because I wasn't invited into their lives or didn't feel welcome. But Jesus sees, really sees these guys, and then he intentionally invites them to come and see.

What are you looking for? Come and see.

I want you to close your eyes for just a moment. Recall, if you can, the first time you heard the name “Jesus.” How did you find him? What were you looking for? Who was it that said to you, “Come and see?” Maybe Jesus

has just always been a part of your life and you can't remember the exact moment. That's okay. But think about that profound moment when you either first heard of this Jesus-guy, as I did as a seven-year-old, or maybe the first time you remember making a conscious decision that you wanted to follow him. Open your eyes. Now, when you came in to worship today, you were all given a little slip of paper and a writing utensil. Write down the name of the person or people or maybe a word or two that describes the moment or place where you knew of or decided to follow Jesus. You can leave that slip of paper in your pew or drop it off on the way out today. We are going to create a visual display using those very slips of paper as a sign of God's work in all of us who make up this church. But we're not going to stop there. We're going to *build* on that display by adding in the names/places/moments when we have seen an opportunity to invite someone into the life of this church and relationship with God. I want to see this display overflowing with slips of paper as a visible sign of the welcome, inclusivity, and love of this community of believers—as a testimony to the power of Jesus's invitation: What are you looking for? Come and see.

In the coming weeks, we are going to talk about the ways in which Jesus has been revealed to the world *and* we're going to imagine ways in which we can invite others into the joy and blessing of following the great “for instance” of our faith. As a minister, we get asked often to share our faith journey and it is one of the things that sometimes makes a church want to call us as their spiritual guide. What if we could find unique ways to share that with others around us who either don't know Jesus yet or who don't know the blessing of community that comes with Jesus's invitation to “come and see.” To do that, we must be curious and care. What are they looking

for? How might we help them find it? In what new and inventive ways can we say to our neighbors, “Come and see?”

It occurred to me this week that we, as a church, need to rediscover what four-year-old Annie knew so instinctively: the lost art the invitation. Without Annie’s sweet little invitation, where would I be? How different would my life or the lives of those I’ve served be? Annie didn’t know how I’d respond to that question. She wasn’t pushy or presumptive. She was curious. She cared. She asked. She simply asked and in asking invited and welcomed me into a mission that, though it would take years to take hold, changed my life and the lives of so many. She planted a little seed or, as I describe it, a pebble along my path to loving and serving God and all that God has created. She was a little like the Apostle Paul who traveled throughout the Roman world testifying to her love for God and inviting people into life with Christ and the life of the community of believers who became Christians. Maybe we don’t always know what people are looking for, but nothing on earth can stop us from inviting them to come and see. Amen.