

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

January 20, 2008

“What are you looking for?” *What do you seek? What are you really longing for in this life?* Jesus asked the two disciples of John the Baptist who followed him. It is a question he asks of us, here today; and one we do well to ask ourselves as we journey on through our lives. Lest we end up somewhere else, with something else in this busy world of too many options, expectations and demands. Lest we lose sight of our real purpose and meaning. Lest what we are looking for get lost in the shuffle of life. As the Chinese proverb says, “If you do not change direction—or, if you never really reckon your direction—you are likely to end up where you are headed.”

So, what are we looking and longing for? Is it really fame and fortune, or at least recognition and admiration? Is it security? Comfort? Happiness? Love? Not to be alone? (I’m assuming we’re talking, here, on a deeper level than that new kitchen, nice though it would be, or that snazzy new car in mid-life.) When we do stop and think about it, we fumble for the words, perhaps, searching for what it is, what we really are looking for.

When I prepare parents and godparents for a baptism, I ask, “What do you most deeply desire for this child?” Usually they stop and think for a long moment. Often the response is that she be happy and healthy, happy with who she is and what she makes of her life. Successful, fulfilled. That he will never be in need, but always be secure. And, sometimes, that he grow up in the church, that he know the love of God in the love that is here, in the congregation.

“What are you looking for?” Andrew and the disciple answered Jesus with another question, “Where are you staying?” May sound a little odd, but they are on his wavelength. They’re not asking for information—an address, whose house, how are the beds there? how is the food? *Where are you staying, abiding, remaining?* The Greek word here has the sense of all these. *Where are you? Where will we find you? Where can we come to know you?* That is what they want know.

Everything in this world passes away: empires, administrations, strong towers, wealth and possessions, people and things we love, and we, ourselves. Only God endures and remains. In the Old Testament, permanence is an attribute of God. Our life is fleeting; we wither like the grass and blow away. But God endures forever.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine of Hippo would write, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you,” in God, “in whom we live and move and have our being.” And is that not what we are looking for? What we most deeply long for? To remain, to abide with the one who is and was and is to be; to know the life and goodness that is at the heart of the world. Who is revealed and known in Jesus. This is what we are hearing in this opening chapter of the Gospel acc. to John.

Jesus' first words in John's gospel are what follows. Perceiving their desire to draw closer, to know him, Jesus invites them farther in: "Come and see." Come and be with him. Find out what life in his presence will mean in their lives. "They came and saw where he was *staying* and they *remained* with him that day," (still all the same word in Greek). John, the author, wants us to notice that there is a lot of remaining and staying with going on here. There is relationship being formed here.

And what had John the Baptist been telling about Jesus the day before? At his baptism, John had said, "I saw the spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it *remained* on him." The Spirit *remained* on Jesus because this is the Gospel of John. Jesus and the Father are one. They *remain* in one another, they *abide* in one another. And through John the Baptist's eyes, we see this, along with Andrew and the other disciple.

Right here, already, at the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus is making the invitation to come to God by coming to him. There is already the suggestion of the later promise that he and the Father will make their home, their dwelling place, in anyone who comes to him. That they will always be present with and part of anyone who believes.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, the evangelist tells us. There's a good possibility it was a Friday, and, at four o'clock, near sunset, so that they would have stayed with Jesus that night and through the Sabbath, until sunset on Saturday, because they could not travel on the Sabbath. But this was not an invitation for an afternoon or an evening, or a whole day. This is an invitation to be his disciple, for a lifetime; for eternity.

There are places that are holy because they have been so much prayed in. There are shrines and places of pilgrimage that are holy because they are associated with saints ancient and modern, saints like Martin Luther King, Jr. There are places that have meaning for us because we have felt there the presence of God's love and peace. This church is such a place for many of us, because we have felt our hearts lifted to God here.

But John's gospel tells us that the presence of Christ, of the Father, of the Spirit, is not only "out there" in special or particular places. The presence is "here, there, anywhere" (T.S. Eliot, "East Coker," l. 50) The presence is everywhere, is in you, to stay, to remain, to abide. Never leaving no matter what, even when you can't seem to catch a glimpse or a hint of it anywhere.

"Come and see," Jesus said, and they went. And, in a very much telescoped process of becoming disciples, knowing and understanding, Andrew right away announced to Simon Peter, his brother, "We have found the Messiah." John the evangelist is showing us a summary, in this first chapter, of a process that continues through a lifetime. And, in so doing, makes us so wish that we could have been there ourselves, to see and hear and know, as Andrew and his companion did.

What was it they saw? What did they hear? How did they come to know with such conviction? Come and see, is the invitation. The evangelist will take the rest of the gospel to show us. “And the Word became flesh and lived/dwelt/tented¹ among us and we have seen his glory,” we read in the prologue, at the beginning of this opening chapter. (John 1:14) As we read on, we will see his glory in the signs he performs, beginning with his changing water into wine the following day, at a wedding in Cana. Finally, the fullness of his glory will be revealed, in John, on the cross, and in the resurrection.

We can see, and come to know, what those disciples saw and knew in entering into the Word—reading, studying, meditating, praying, talking with each other, sharing questions and insights. And we can find what we are looking for here, in the beauty and awe of worship. In the sacrament, the gift of new and abundant life, life in union with Christ and one another.

We come to know the abiding presence of God in Christ in the love of the community. It is in John that Jesus tells the disciples, “Love one another as I have loved you.” In the community of faith we learn about staying with one another, and staying with the needs of the world, as the fullness of God stays with us, in Christ and in the Spirit. We learn to be faithful and constant. We share in sorrows and joys, and grow in compassion. We learn forbearance in love when we disagree, asking forgiveness when we hurt each other.

In the strength of the abiding love of Christ and the community, we learn to stay with the needs of the world. “Loving puts us on our knees, serving as though we were slaves. . . .” (Hymn #602) we sing on Maundy Thursday. We learn, like Jesus, to serve our neighbors “nearby and far away,” and grow in awareness of his abiding presence not only in us but in the people we serve.

To come and see is a lifelong process. But whatever we have found, whatever we have seen and learned, is not ours to keep for ourselves. It is given to us to share, like John the Baptist, and Andrew, then Peter and Philip and Nathanael; like John, the evangelist. Pass it on: we have found what we are looking for, we are finding it even now, more and more. Even in our doubts and fears and times of unknowing. These, too, are holy times. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Come and see!

¹This is the word for Jesus’s living with us in this world, incarnate, in the flesh, only for a time. Not the same as the Greek for staying, remaining, abiding, which is for eternity.