

What Are You Looking For?

Psalm 40:1-11

John 1:29-42

Introduction to John: We read about the first encounter between John the Baptist and his cousin, Jesus. But, John's first response to Jesus makes no sense unless we remember how John begins and frames his whole gospel. The Gospel of John begins with a cosmic description of Jesus as the one who was always, from the beginning, with God and was God. John says that in and through Jesus "all things came into being . . . and without him not one thing came into being." (Jn 1:3) So, when John the Baptist says that Jesus was "before him", he is not referring to human time and space. In fact, John the Baptist was born before Jesus in linear time. John the Baptist is talking about Jesus' true identity as fully God and fully human.

I was out in Forest Acres the other day when I ran into a young woman who has been a regular volunteer for the Summer Day-Camp, called Camp Mates, that our church has hosted for autistic children. The Autism Academy of SC has held and will hold this summer a day camp for autistic children. They provide the expertise and volunteers and we provide the space. And this young woman has been a regular volunteer at the Autism Camp each summer. So, we were speaking about the camp that will be coming up this summer again here at FLPC, and the sales woman who was patiently waiting for me to finish, asked me what church I was talking about. And so, I explained the partnership that the Autism Academy and Forest Lake Presbyterian Church had. She, said, "Forest Lake! I was baptized in that church!" So, that led to a conversation about her growing up in Forest Acres and about how her family had been very active when she and her siblings were younger. But now, she said, her parents are working and are just very tired, they don't go there anymore because they are just tired and they rest on Sundays. I did not tell her that I was now the pastor, but I did say, well we would love to have you and your parents come back and visit sometime. And I told her a couple of the things we do in addition to Camp Mates. She smiled politely and that was it.

After over thirty years of ordained ministry, it disturbs me often how many people have come through these doors, brought their children through this doors, been baptized, confirmed, attended Bible Studies, participated in Church community and who eventually find themselves disconnected from any Christian Community. As much as I hate it and want FLPC to be the church for everyone, I know that it is not. So, it doesn't bother me nearly as much that some folks have left us to go to another Christian Community. That is fine. We are partial and human and cannot be everything to everyone. But, what about the folks who have been part of this

community and who don't show any evidence of seeking to know, worship or serve God at all? That bothers me a lot.

And, what I ask myself is, how did they do all of that without experiencing the living God? Because an encounter with the living God is what reorients us, changes us, knocks the walls of our preconceived small lives down and leaves us wanting to know more. You and I cannot make someone love God, nor are we able to conjure up a God experience. God shows up wherever and whenever God chooses. But, when God does show up, our task is to point to God and to help those who do not yet see to recognize what they are seeing.

That is what John the Baptist does for his own disciples. "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" And his disciples stopped following John and instead began to follow Jesus. That is how disciples are made – not through our own efforts, but because we can effectively and authentically point to where we see God in the world.

That is the same thing the Psalmist does. The singer of Psalm 40 is hoping and waiting on God to deliver. The first line is most often translated, "I waited patiently for the Lord." But literally, the Hebrew is more like "Waiting, I was waiting on the Lord." A good case could be made for the impatience of the one waiting. The Contemporary English Bible takes a middle ground and translates this verse, "I put all my hope in the Lord." So, patiently or impatiently, the psalmist is stuck in the pit of death, a swamp, quicksand and was going down. But God heard the psalmist pleas and lifted him out of the "mud and filth, and set my feet on solid rock. He steadied my legs. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise for our God." (CEB 40:2-3) Then, the psalmist says, "Many people will learn of this and be amazed; they will trust the Lord." (40:3b)

It is Andrew, in John's Gospel, who has seen Jesus and who goes to get his brother, Simon Peter, and says, "We have found the Messiah." And it is Simon Peter's encounter with Jesus – the Anointed One or The Christ – that changes the course of his life forever. Simon Peter's meeting even changes his name. Jesus says, you will be called Cephas (in ARAMAIC?????) or Petros in Greek, or Peter in English.

What I am really afraid of – after committing 30 years of my life to the Church – is that too often when people come, worship, study and participate in the life of the Church, that too many of us never encounter "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Too often, all they encounter are imperfect and inadequate preachers, untransformed people who claim to be Christian but who mostly point to themselves and to the importance of wealth, power, beauty and the status quo. And in that case, who can blame them for staying home on Sunday mornings!!!

Years ago, in a Sunday School class that I taught, we invited each other to tell stories of where and how we felt we had seen God at work. And, a young woman, who had grown up in that congregation told the most amazing story that I can practically quote it after almost 35 years. She told the class that she had been rebellious in high school, and had become involved with a group of friends who were more interested in smoking pot and stealing to live than anything

else. Her parents had objected, but their attempts to control or to change her course of action had only strengthened her resistance. So, she left home following her High school graduation and moved in with her boyfriend. Her parents, she said, were heartbroken. Before too long, the boyfriend began to beat her. And the beatings grew more and more violent as the months passed. She said that one night, following a particularly scary night of drugs and beatings, she determined that she couldn't take it anymore and that she would call her parents. And if they wouldn't come and get her, she would kill herself. So, she found a pay phone (that's how you know how old this story is), begged a quarter and called her parents at about 2 o'clock in the morning. She begged them to come and get her and told them where she was. Her father, came immediately and picked her up and brought her home. Although it was now about 3 o'clock in the morning, her mother ran a hot bath for her daughter and when she came out of the tub, there was her mother's soft bathrobe and new pajamas waiting for her. She came out of the bathroom and smelled breakfast. And she, her mother and father all had a celebratory breakfast. That young woman finished her story, before an absolutely silent Sunday School classroom full of people who claimed to know God, by saying that she knew that God was real because her parents had welcomed her back home just like the father welcomed the prodigal home – down to the new robe and the feast.

One more story, before I must stop. Again, years ago, I have told you often of the experience I had of living in downtown Mobile, Alabama and working with the homeless supported by the congregation of Government Street Presbyterian Church. To say that I was afraid, would be an understatement. Nothing I had done or learned had prepared me for homeless ministry, and I was afraid to live in the downtown apartment where I heard bottles crashing and prostitutes hawking for much of the night. To be fair, the people in the church were afraid for me too. So they had put in an alarm and made me swear to numerous security procedures. But, I had felt such a strong sense of compulsion to do this ministry for a year, that I had said "yes". It was only there, late at night, when I was afraid to sleep with the lights off and I prayed fervently to God to keep me safe. And – I have told this story before, but I remember it like it was yesterday. One night, awakened by the sound of bottles crashing, I was praying – afraid and worried – and to my heart (in a voice that my ears could not hear), I heard God say that while I was not promised safety, that God did promise that whatever happened to me that I would not be alone. Whatever happened, God would be there and that I would be given the strength to survive and to use my experience – whatever that would be – to serve God's purpose.

When Jesus turns and asks the disciples of John the Baptist, who are now following him, "What are you looking for?" they say, "Teacher, where are you staying." Note, they do not say, teach us the right theology, or give us the magic words so we can heal, or can we visit you again one day. They go and "remained with him that day", and we know that the whole course of their lives changed because of that encounter.

The Church is only useful to God when we remember that our chief purpose in life is to know God, to love God and to serve God. And until we have encountered or met God, none of that is possible. We cannot share what we have not experienced. And being able to point to God in the world only comes from a genuine relationship with that God. And that relationship cannot

be faked, cannot be borrowed, and is not the same as a perfect attendance pin or a spotless moral record.

Jesus' question is to us. What are we looking for? And if the answer is not – like the Psalmist's – “Here I come! . . . I want to do your will, my God. Your instruction is deep within me.” Then we won't be yet able to point to God so that others can see. I believe that God is active all around us all the time. Maybe we don't see it because we don't look for it? Maybe we don't see it because those of us who have experienced God don't talk about our experience enough. Maybe we don't see it because we are looking for other things. Maybe we don't see it because we don't recognize that when our father comes to pick us up in the middle of the night, or our Stephen Minister listens patiently, or our neighbor brings a meal or the nurse in the hospital takes extra time to give us a bath that wasn't scheduled – maybe we don't recognize the reality behind that love and kindness. Maybe, if we haven't experienced God, we settle for what we think is the best we can do – serving the Church, coming to worship and hoping to be acceptable to God because of our own goodness. Whatever the reason, if we have never experienced the living God or if we have but have neglected to tell others about that encounter, Scripture says to us: Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! I have seen and testified that this one is God. May God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be visible to us all and may we be and become faithful in telling the world, our neighbors, the children in this church and our own families how we have been rescued by God. Let there be a new song in our mouths, and a song of praise for God on our lips.