

Sermon
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 15th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [ISAIAH 49:1-7; PSALM 40:1-12; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9; JOHN 1:29-42](#)

As part of the ordination process, I spent three months completing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at the Ottawa Hospital. Part of that training involved personal reflection and self-awareness, and part of it was about offering spiritual care to patients. Questions were a big part of both of those things. Our instructor was relentless in guiding us to ask open-ended questions: a yes or no answer closed things off, and ended the conversation, but an open-ended question was full of potential and possibility...

This morning's Gospel passage brings us an open-ended question from Jesus that is overflowing with potential and possibility. John's disciples follow him, and he turns and asks them "What are you looking for?" They respond with another question "Where are you staying?" and Jesus keeps things open with his response: "Come and see."

"What are you looking for?" and "Come and see". These words express the call and response that is woven through life. God is always asking us "What are you looking for?" and inviting us to "come and see" – to come and see – and feel, and be – with God and with one another with love, and care, and compassion.

Both this Gospel passage, and our passage from Isaiah this morning invite us to think about our calling, about our vocation. What are we looking for on this earthly journey? How and where is God calling us? What is God inviting us to see? Frederick Buechner offers a nutshell definition of vocation saying that: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Frederick Buechner, [Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC](#)) The point of this is the connecting – the intersecting. What is deep in us connects with what is in the world and God is with us in all of it.

There are lots of things that get in the way of this connecting and intersecting. Lots of things that hold us back from living into God's whisperings deep in us, but I would say that it is fear – and the different ways fear manifests itself as insecurity, judgement, power and control – more than anything that holds us back from even beginning to answer the question "What are you looking for?" and certainly from stepping into Jesus's invitation to "Come and see".

We heard John say in our Gospel passage this morning "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Over the centuries, more and more theology

portrayed God as having demanded the blood sacrifice of God's beloved child in payment for the offences we are guilty of, and many Christians today believe that we deserve to be punished for our sins, and that God sent Jesus to absorb that punishment as a sacrificial lamb to the slaughter. Fear is tightly woven into this perspective.

In first-century Jewish life, the Passover lamb wasn't a sin offering or atonement sacrifice. The lamb was a ritual remembrance of the Exodus story, and liberation from Egyptian enslavement, meaning that as a name for Jesus, "Lamb of God" isn't about punishment, but rather about liberation. It's about freedom from what constrains us and holds us back from evolving into the fullness of our humanity, connected to God our Creator, and the source of life. Jesus came to take away the sin of the world in the same way that a liberator takes away the shackles of captivity. The word that John uses is *airo*: meaning "to raise, lift up, remove" and it's the same word used in John 20 to say that the stone has been removed from the tomb.

Fear separates us from God, and from each other. Last week I talked about the fact that so much of religion has been about trying to define where God is and where God isn't. Trying to define who is in God's image and who isn't. This is all about separation and alienation. Jesus changed that. He responds to our alienation from God and each other by taking away what gets in the way of relationship, and connection.

Jesus says "Come and see". He says come and see, and don't be afraid because God is with you in everything, and you are invited to be with one another with love, and compassion, and peace and justice.

The first thing Jesus did in his ministry was to call – to gather – the disciples. Jesus made a new community, and those who answered his call belonged to this new community. There was no organized body of doctrines to assent to –only the requirement to follow. A pattern of behaviour came after the belonging – that new community was a community of practice. The disciples listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, what to do in the world. They healed people, offered hospitality, prayed together, challenged traditional practices and rituals, ministered to the sick, they comforted the grieving. These actions opened up a new vision of God, and a new belief. By doing things together, they began to see differently. In Jesus's community of disciples belonging came first, then behaving, and then believing.

In her book "Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening" (2012) Diana Butler Bass writes about the three Bs - belong, behave and believe – and a "Great Reversal". She calls for a return to this order of

the three B's that I've just described: belong, behave, believe. She describes the last 500 years or so of Western Christianity as having had this the other way around: believe first, then behave – follow “the rules” – and then you'll belong.

Having to believe first sends us on a search for God outside of what we know already, and if we separate belief from our ordinary experiences of this life we may well end up in a place of struggling to see, and longing to belong. Jesus invites us to stop looking for God in what we've never seen, and to look at what we see and know already in a new way. Having to behave in a certain way that “follows the rules”, and that is assessed to determine whether or not we belong fosters fear and alienation. Jesus has us searching for faith, and for belief, in community knowing that we belong, and inviting us not to let fear separate us from God and each other and our world.

The Gospels shows us a way to behave that is all about compassion, justice, peace, and love. It's not about fear and power and control. There is profound hope in this. Take that hope with you today. Let it be the lens you look through this week. Know that you belong. Behave with compassion and love and solidarity. Don't be afraid to ask open-ended questions to yourself, and to others. Open your eyes and your heart to “come and see” God everywhere. In Jesus name. Amen.