

Sermon for 2 Epiphany A
St. John's, Gloucester
Lise Hildebrandt
Jan 15, 2023

If you read the Gospel carefully, you see that there is a lot of movement in it. John sees Jesus **coming towards him** and declares that he, Jesus, is the one who **is coming after him**. He knows he's the one, because he saw the Spirit **coming down on him and staying on him**. The next day John and two of his disciples again see Jesus **walking by**, and John indicates again, "Here is the one you want," so the disciples **followed Jesus**. They **came** to where Jesus was staying and they **stayed with him**. Then Andrew **went** and found his brother Simon and **brought Simon** to Jesus.

This is the Gospel of John, which always has two or three meanings going on simultaneously. So you can be sure that the movement described is more than just physical comings and goings. Jesus is starting his ministry, moving around Judea, Galilee and the surrounding areas—he is moving into the picture as the Messiah. John's role is moving from being a prophet, preparing the people for the one who is coming, to being the one who helps Jesus step into active ministry, and telling people—here he is! The disciples have been following John and make their move to follow Jesus. There is great energy, excitement, life in this passage. The movement and excitement are infectious, spilling over into others. The first thing Andrew does is get his brother, Simon, and bring him to Jesus—You gotta see him, bro! He's the real thing!

The other theme in this passage is about seeking and finding. Jesus speaks for the first time in the Gospel of John, and in 42 verses, he only says two short sentences, and these are to the two of John's disciples who are following him. He says, "What are you looking for—what are you seeking?" and then he says, "Come and see."

It makes sense that movement and seeking are connected in this passage. After all, if we lose something, what do we do? We go looking for it. You get ready to leave the house and suddenly you can't find your keys. You look in your purse or backpack, you look on the hook and in coat and pants pockets, you ask other people in the house if they have seen them. Lots of movement and activity until you locate the keys, which you absent-mindedly put on the counter when you stopped to take a phone call. Right?

But there is another kind of seeking that calls for movement. Seeking not what has been lost, but what is desired, what you haven't yet found or had in your life. Looking for a friend or spouse, seeking a new path, wanting answers or consolation. This means moving in new directions, making new relationships, trying out new things.

This second type of seeking is what the disciples of John were doing. What were they seeking? We don't know exactly, except that they first found it in John, and then found it in Jesus, the Messiah. John's message of right relationship with God, maybe even his wildness, his critique of the institutions of the day, his fierce insistence on truth and integrity—these no doubt struck a chord in those who became his disciples. They had been looking for **something more** than what the religion and customs of the day offered. In John, they found someone who fed their souls and gave them purpose. And yet, John insisted that he wasn't the full answer. He wasn't the Messiah, the anointed one, the one who was coming.

John's message to them was—I'm the warm-up act—keep looking for the main attraction. And so when John said, "There he is!" they responded. Maybe they didn't even know what that meant; they just knew that their trusted teacher and guide pointed them in the right direction and said, "Follow him" and they did.

They **went** with Jesus, stayed with him, and found what they were looking for. This is the One who will reveal to us just who God is and how we are to live our lives. So Andrew **goes** and gets his brother Simon and tells him, "We have found the Messiah" and **brings** Simon to Jesus.

"What are you seeking?" Jesus asks. And he says, "Come and see."

Church, I ask you, "What are you looking for? What are you seeking?" There are two things that I know about straight off. One—you are seeking new ways to be church, to change and redevelop your mission so that the church connects to people and serves people not currently here. And not in the sense of "we want more people to come here and like what we like and do what we do," because we know that doesn't work—but in the sense of "we need to talk to people and learn where they are in their life and spiritual journeys and create with them or let them create new forms of spiritual food, things we've never done before." And the Visioning Team has been considering the question, "What IF St. John's centered the needs, experiences, and gifts—the spiritual hungers and expressions—of younger people, especially LGBTQ—in this community?" What if we learned about their lives and made space for them to find a spiritual home and collaborate in doing new things? That's a big, scary, exciting, open, scary, exciting question!

What are you seeking? In a sense, something that none of us has an idea of—no set answer to what that would look like. Moving around in new ways in the community, making new connections, coming and going and looking for what God might do with and for us.

The second thing you are seeking is a Priest-in-Charge to accompany you for the next 3 or more years on this scary exciting journey into new ways of being church. This week, we learned that the diocese has identified a candidate for Priest-in-Charge for St. John's. That doesn't mean that this person WILL become the priest for St. John's, but it means that this COULD BE the person that you have been seeking. The wardens will tell you more about the process ahead in the announcement time. And this announcement may bring up all kinds of emotions in you—excitement, maybe mixed fear and hope, maybe mixed joy and sadness. It certainly is a wake-up call—things could be changing in a few months! And yes, I have been here with you during a very rich and blessed time—but don't forget that you're looking for that next person—"follow THAT one!" That's been my purpose here.

And there is another thing that many of us here are seeking. We are searching for a way to leave behind us a legacy of good and justice. To not only serve and help people, but make our church and our communities more just—to address systemic racism, to align with the poor, to stand up against the powers and corporate greed that are driving us over the climate change cliff. To do that, we have to face our own complicity and grief, and be fortified for this difficult work.

What are you seeking? My two daughters grew up with two pastors as parents, so of course they went to church every Sunday. And pretty quickly they figured out that when ministers or religious educators give children's messages, the answer to every question was "Jesus." I used to cringe sometimes when they said that, because I thought, "surely there should be more depth to children's messages than that."

But of course, they were right. The answer to every question, the answer to every search is Jesus. How is St. John's to change and live in the future and into the future? Seek Jesus. Who is the next right priest for St. John's? Seek Jesus. How are we to live in times of upheaval, uncertainty, erosion of rights, housing crises, turbulent weather? Seek the One who promises to be with us, no matter what, and who modeled standing up for right.

Now is a good time to double down on reading Scripture, especially the Gospels, where you can best come to know Jesus. It's a good time to set aside ten minutes or a half hour a day for prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for guidance, and comfort, and assurance. Ask Jesus to pop up in your life, in our lives, and give us the courage to step out in faith—yet again! Place before him your fears, your grief, your uncertainty—and say, please take them and turn them into good soil for moving forward.

What are you looking for? Come, move and see. Amen.