

**"What are you looking for?"
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – January 15, 2023**

**PLEASE READ:
Isaiah 49:1-7
John 1:29-42**

There is a story about a minister who was new to the community, and one of his first days, he came out of the church and wanted to go to the post office. He didn't know how to find it, so he stopped a little boy going by and said, "Son, can you tell me how to get to the post office?" The little boy replied, "Sure, you go right down this street here to the light, you take a left, and then you go until you see the post office on your left." The minister thanked the lad and trying to be clever, said, "I really appreciate your help. You see this church here? I'm the new pastor, and if you come to worship on Sunday, I'll tell you how to get to heaven." The boy sniffed and said, "Sure!? How are you going to tell me how to find heaven when you can't even find the post office?" Sometimes I feel like that minister: too confident in the abstract; too fuzzy in the concrete...

John begins his Gospel with abstract theological assertions about who Jesus is rather than a concrete historical assertion as the synoptic gospel writers do. John proclaims Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one you do not know, the one revealed to Israel who would not baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit. John from the very beginning, almost in a suffocating way, asserts the divine origin of this one who in the beginning was with God and who was God, and through whom all things came into being...

It's ironic, given John's lofty theological convictions about who Jesus is, that he introduces Jesus' ministry in such a down-to-earth way. Jesus, presented in dramatic contrast with John's prologue, asks simply: "What are you looking for?"

It's a good first question to ask ourselves as we begin 2023. It's a question I'm asking myself as I turn 62 this week. It seems a natural time to re-think what's important in life and how my ideals line up with my actual priorities. "What are you looking for?" can be a stirring, provocative question...

How you might answer such a question depends naturally on where you are in life's journey and what you value. I've been shocked at George Santos and the new level to which he has taken pathological lying. Tulsi Gabbard, former House Representative from Hawaii interviewed him on *Fox News* and asked him at one point, "Have you no shame?" Apparently, Mr. Santos is looking for power and any way to get it. Too many of us are more interested in somebody else's life. Did you see how *Spare*, Harry's book about the dirt on the British royal family broke records selling almost 1.5 million copies the first day? Or as Mary talked about last week, too many of us are lonely and just looking for relief. Global sales of pain relief medication hit over \$80 billion dollars last year. Global alcohol: *\$1.5 trillion!*

What are you looking for? Most people would answer happiness, fulfillment, peace, love... Some might list specific goals they want to achieve in their career or

personal life. Through the pandemic, many people were looking to get out of the city and spend less time at work and more time with family.

What are you looking for? For the first disciples, the question was unsettling, if not irritating, and they dodged it with a question of our own. "Where are you staying?" Jesus beckons, "Come and see."

Could it be that there is a connection between Jesus' profound elusive question and his answer to the disciples' evasive question? Put together, Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?" and he invites us, "Come and see." The fact is, we don't always know what we are looking for in life, but Jesus calls us to come and be with him. And in following where God leads, we may find what we're looking for in life...

Isn't that irritating? I don't know about you, but I want to know as many of the details as possible. We typically want to assess our own needs, define our own goals, and then nail down our own plan to reach those goals. But sooner or later we learn that reality is not neatly framed or determined by our needs or aspirations.

So Jesus call us out of our existential confusion! We are free from abstract speculation. By honestly acknowledging that we are not so sure of ourselves, we are more free to follow God. And maybe that's the key to some of our struggles of faith. Possibly what you and I need to hear more than anything else today is that *it doesn't so much matter where we are going as who we are following*. God will take care of our future. The direction we so desperately want to plan is not ours to control ultimately. Our calling is to trust God here and now, and to follow and be where God calls us. Paul wrote, "We walk by faith and not by sight."

We need to remember the gospel presents a clear choice in how we live our lives. Professor Richard Lovelace put it this way, "Are you basing your justification on your sanctification? Or are you basing your sanctification on your justification?" What he means is that the gospel is simply this: we are saved by grace through faith. That is our basis for being at peace with God. *Justification* (or being put in a right relationship with God) is realized by what Christ has done for us that which we could not do for ourselves.

Sanctification is the process of working out God's grace in all areas of our lives. We can choose to try to live our lives so that we are good enough to stand justified before God, or we can live our lives knowing that we are already justified before God, and so freely live to honor and glorify God. There is a profound, a foundational difference here and you need to constantly ask yourself, "Am I following God in order to be loved by God? or "Do I believe I am loved by God, therefore I want to follow God's way for my life?"

If you think you have to perform in order to please God, you're going to live a very frustrated life. Apparently, there is a great deal of frustration in our town. Did you know that the NC police responded to 67 domestic violence calls last year, and that half of them resulted in arrests? Now you think about that. We all have

troubles at times in our relationships. I guess anybody who's been married has had some conflict with their partner, but those numbers are trending up. And that means a terrible end to relationships which started out with only loving intentions.

In our first lesson, Isaiah was speaking to a people whose world had come to an end. Having been once the envy of the Orient, the people of Israel were now humiliated, enslaved in exile. Isaiah described them as "deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slaves of rulers." Like then, sometimes our road in life seems to lead to a dead-end; to pain, neglect, rejection, defeat, doubt, and frustration. But Isaiah was convinced that God's calling goes back to our very beginning. "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me... and he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, *in whom I will be glorified.*"

We discover here that our purpose and worth is not dependent on where we are in life, but where we are with God... No matter what kind of exile we may find ourselves in, God is faithful and will show God's glory through us. This is a word of hope as we begin another year... God promises to work in and through even us! Through it all, God's grace prevails. Israel is exhibit A. Even through aliens, even through those who feel despised and abhorred, God will reveal glory. The disciples are exhibit B. Even through a rag-tag band of misfits, ill-equipped and inadequate, God will reveal God's glory.

Tomorrow is the celebration of the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., humanitarian and social justice activist and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. MLK's dream was that people would be judged not on the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. It was MLK who lifted up the question "What are you looking for?" to the whole nation at a time when we were in denial about the systemic violence and harm done to people of color.

MLK beckoned us to "Come and see..." the truth of white supremacy and the reminder that injustice for one meant injustice for all. Come and see is not always an invitation to see the good, but a prophetic imperative to reveal the evils that need to be redeemed and cleansed from our lives and life together.

Just over two and half years ago, it was Darnella Frazier, a brave African American 17-year-old girl who filmed the entire eight and half minutes of the cold-blooded, senseless killing of George Floyd by a member of the Minneapolis police department for everyone in America and the rest of the world to see. The demonstrations following Floyd's murder were a sign of hope for our collective wellbeing during the dark, early days of the pandemic as large biracial crowds marched together in more than 2,000 towns and cities across the country.

Members of our church in Paris joined tens of thousands to march around the champs de mars at the foot of the Eiffel Tower. George Floyd's murderer has been sent to prison for 22 years, and Darnella earned the Pulitzer Prize for her filming, but whether those displays of black-white unity mark a genuine shift in the American climate or nothing more than a temporary break in the clouds is not yet certain.

So, "What are you looking for?" It's a good question to ask in this season of Epiphany. Even if you may not be too sure, take comfort in the fact that Christ is sure of you. God loves you and invites you to come and see. Even when you don't know what you're looking for, Christ sees you and calls you to pursue the way of forgiveness and love, of liberty and justice for all. As you follow the way of Christ, you will see God's light shining upon you, you will see God's glory at work within you, and you will see God's loving salvation reaching through you to all the earth.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.