

“What are you looking for?”

John 1:29-42

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Pastor Peter Hanson
Christ the King Lutheran Church

Jan. 15, 2017

Thirty years ago, iconic Irish rock band U2 released their album “The Joshua Tree.” Of course, saying that out loud makes me feel old, since I remember that album release so clearly from my senior year of college. Included on that album was a song called “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for,” which was later re-released as a live version with a gospel choir. It’s a song of longing, of searching, of seeking and not quite finding. Its lyrics go like this:

I have climbed the highest mountains
I have run through the fields
Only to be with you
I have run, I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls
Only to be with you
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for

One of the things I’ve loved about this song all these thirty years—and indeed, one of the reasons I truly love and admire the band U2 to this day—is that while they are self-proclaimed followers of Jesus, they still also freely admit that not only do they not have all the answers, they are still full of questions, even doubts at times. While they are convinced and convicted of being Christians, they still also proudly admit to being seekers. They are still looking for something. And at times, even thirty years later, they still haven’t found all that they’ve been looking for.

There’s something reassuring about that. Reassuring that people who share our faith in Jesus Christ, who are mature and confident in their faith, even quite public in their witness to that faith are still able to say out loud from time to time that there’s something they’re still looking for, something they still seeking after. That they don’t have all the answers all the time, and that their understanding of religious faith, of belief in Jesus Christ still allows for questions, for uncertainty, for doubt, even; for continued curiosity, continued insight, continued knowledge deepened understanding. There’s something reassuring, too, about the idea that being a seeker is not necessarily the polar opposite of being a believer, not even a sort of mid-point between believer and non-believer. It’s reassuring that one can have faith, can believe and still leave room to be looking for something else, something more. And I hear distinct echoes of this reassurance—this

gracious allowing of true and confident faith to exist along side continued seeking, continued looking for something else, something more—I hear this in the way Jesus engages with a few of John the Baptist's disciples, some of whom continue their quest to find what their looking for by leaving John to follow Jesus. What an interesting question to pose to these would-be followers right as his ministry begins—as he begins to be revealed himself to these followers and to us throughout these readings for the season after the Epiphany.

One of my mentors in seminary, New Testament professor Robert Smith, used to tell us to pay careful attention to what each of the gospel's presents as Jesus' first words spoken in his public ministry. One of the reasons we have four gospels—or at least one of the great benefits from having four gospels—he used to say, is that they complete the picture of who Jesus is, what he said, each with their own focus, their own point of view, their own way of emphasizing certain aspects of Jesus' life, teachings, and ministry.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus' ministry begins with a well-crafted sermon to crowds who have gathered on a mountain—aptly named the Sermon on the Mount. In Mark, his first words are directed to a demon—to silence him and heal the one who has been possessed by the demon for so long. In Luke, he begins with a scripture reading and a sermon, quoting first from Isaiah that proclaims the year of God's favor, and then saying that this scripture, this prophecy has come true in him. But here, in John, Jesus' public ministry begins with words spoken just after his baptism by John, and these first words take the form of a question, "What are you looking for?" Now, on the surface, this does not seem to be that profound of a question—since these two disciples of John and sort of almost literally hanging around, waiting to see what Jesus may do next. He asks them a question, "What are you looking for?" which might better be translated "What are you seeking?"

They have been following John the Baptist as he has been engaged in his ministry of baptism throughout the countryside. They have heard John refer to Jesus as "the one more powerful than I," "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and "the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." Now, it seems they were at least curious about this person John was pointing to. Jesus must sense in them this yearning, this

longing, this searching. “What are you looking for,” he asks them?

It’s a question that likely resonates with many of us—with an existential longing deep within us. What are we looking for? Where are we looking? To whom do we look? Would we know if it we found it, or might we keep on looking? On a certain level, I would venture to guess that we are looking for a place to belong—a place where we belong to something bigger than us, where we belong to God and to one another. We are looking to a place or a group of people, or a situation where our lives matter. Where we can be ourselves. Where we are seen as lovable and capable people. Where there is room for us at the table.

Jesus seems to anticipate the depth of his own question, the depth of the longing within these two who would quickly, we are told, become two of his own disciples. And soon after asking this simple, yet profound question—and having heard their question back to Jesus—where are you staying, where are you dwelling, where are you abiding, where do you live and move and have your being—Jesus responds to these two and to the others they would eventually invite in turn with an invitation that is similarly deep despite its seeming simplicity.

Two verbs—come and see. Two proposed actions, come and see. No pressure, no heavy-handed tactics, no bait-and-switch. Just a simple invitation to come as they are, to see for themselves. It’s an invitation that is one offered to each of us as well. Come as you are, see for yourself.

Sarah and I did not really know what to expect when our neighbors invited us to join them last Monday for a Sea Shanty Sing. It was offered at the Dubliner pub not too far from our house in Saint Paul. Now, we understood all of the words of the invitation—pub, sing, sea shanty, Monday night—but we weren’t familiar with a pub-based Sea Shanty sing taking place in our neighborhood on the second Monday of the month. And we didn’t know what to expect. Frankly, neither did our neighbors—they had heard of such a thing before, and had been to a similar gathering at a similar pub in Minneapolis, but never at the Dubliner, never on a Monday night. So what did we do? We went, to see for ourselves.

Well, what we saw was actually amazing. We got there early, order a round of beer and some dinner, and the pub started filling up with people. And then, just after 7, without any warning at all, a man in an Irish sweater and a long grey beard stood up in the middle of the room and started singing:

“Look ahead, look astern, look a-weather and a-lee /
Blow high, blow low, and so sailed we;”
There's a lofty ship to windward, and she's sailing fast and free,
Sailing down along the coast of the High Barbaree.

And one after another, people stood up and led a song. No song sheets. No powerpoint. No hymnals. People either knew the songs already, or there was a simple call and response with a refrain that repeated. And for the next two hours, people got up and led songs about Barbary pirates and Greenland whalers and perfect storms off Gloucester and more than a few about sailing around Cape Horn. It was mostly ageing hippies and young hipsters. Not much in between, except us. There was a community—certainly insiders and outsiders, but breaking through that barrier wasn't hard at all. I'm not sure I'd go back, not regularly anyway, but there were certainly people for whom this meant something. They belonged. They were welcome. They had a role. They had an activity. It was actually kind of beautiful to see and experience. And we have never known this little micro-culture even existed if we hadn't been invited. If we hadn't come and seen for ourselves.

Come and see, Jesus says. Come as you are, see for yourself. Jesus' invitation is one we could easily adopt, right here, too. Come and see, No pressure, no heavy-handed tactics, no bait-and-switch. Just a simple invitation to come as they are, to see for themselves. Maybe you know someone who is looking for something, for somewhere to belong, for someone who loves and accepts them. We follow the one more powerful than us, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, the Lamb of God. The one we've been looking for. The one in whom we abide.

Sure, there is still room for our questions, for our continued searching, even for our doubts. Thirty years on, U2 is still lifting up this paradox:

You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains
Carried the cross of my shame—you know I believe it

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

What are you looking for? What do you seek? Where does what you're looking for
abide? Jesus says, come and see. Amen.