

"WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?"

*a sermon preached on Jan. 15, 2023 by Scott Dalgarno
based on John 1:35-42 and Isaiah 49:1-7.*

In this morning's text from John, Jesus meets two men who will become his disciples: Simon and Andrew. Unlike the accounts in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, in John's gospel Simon and Andrew are not fishing on the Sea of Galilee. No, John, the gospel writer, places them many miles away in the desert south, in Judea, where they are disciples of John the Baptist before they lay eyes on Jesus. Hear the story again:

The next day John was standing with two of his disciples (Simon and Andrew) and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" [His] two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" John 1:35

Back in the 1980s there was a popular bumper-sticker that spoke to that question in a rather literal way. It said, **Jesus Is The Answer**. Remember?

Well, Jesus does offer important answers to some of life's most basic questions, but what impresses me most about him is that he asks so many of the right questions. Piercing ones.

In one of my favorite stories from his life, he comes to Jerusalem and shows up at a famous healing pool. He looks around at all the people sitting there on grass mats. He asks one of the regulars there about an older fellow. What's his story?

He is told that the man has been hanging out at the pool every day for 38 years -- longer than Jesus has been alive; longer than most people in that day had been alive. Yes, and he's still paralyzed from the waist down.

So Jesus goes over to this man and he asks him a queer question. Knowing this man has been there all those years, he asks him, "Do you want to be well?"

Seems like an odd question, until you think about it awhile. I mean, what would happen if that man could suddenly walk? What would be asked of him? For thirty-eight years he's known just what he is going to do every morning when he wakes up. Breakfast will be waiting for him at the pool. Not great food, but sustenance. If he could suddenly walk he'd have to round that up for himself.

For such a man the question, "Do you want to get well," is very sensitive. Yes, but it's asked by a very caring person; someone who knows the gravity of his own question and who respects the integrity of the man's heart.

You know, Jesus' questions never go out of date. That's why after 2000 years he is as interesting to us as ever.

"What are you looking for?" he asks Peter and Andrew. It's one of those questions that, like many of his, is a bit ambiguous. What are they looking for on this particular day? A good lunch, maybe? A place to sleep that night, since they may be away from home?

Yes, but what are they ALSO looking for in this life? We live by more than bread alone, as someone once said.

You and I go about doing what we do every day. We cross things off our to-do list, one-after- another. But what does it all add up to?

In the midst of the everyday round of activities Jesus stops us, like he stops Simon and Andrew and he asks a question we may not be able to answer easily: "What are you looking for?"

Thinking small, Simon and Andrew blow off Jesus' question and ask their own, "Where are you staying?" and Jesus says, "Come and see."

I like his patience with them. It speaks volumes about his heart. "There'll be time," he is saying, "we'll first get comfortable with one another, and then there will be time to explore the larger questions."

So let me put that dilemma (between large and small matters) in a slightly different context by telling you a story from the life of a minister I admired greatly.

The late Fred Craddock was one of the more respected preachers of the last 50 years. He once wrote that as a child he read stories of the great Christian martyrs of the early church and 19th century missionaries who were sometimes slaughtered by members of their flock, and Fred thought, "How sad to be a Christian in a world where no one is killing Christians."

Kind of counter-intuitive, but, you know, as a nine year old, he was looking for a way to do something he'd heard about repeatedly in his church: that is to literally "give his life for Christ." Here is how Fred once put it

"At night a hymn would sometimes echo in my head," he said. "Are Ye Able, Said The Master. "Yes, I am able," I would say. And I would picture myself standing before a gray wall. And some soldier is saying, 'One last chance to deny Christ and live.' And I would stand there and confess my faith. Then there would come the words, 'Ready, aim, fire.'

[My] body slumps, the flags are at half-mast, widows are weeping in the afternoon. And later a monument is built and people come with their cameras and their children and they say to the kids, "Stand there and let us get your picture right there where Freddie gave his life."

"I was sincere then," said Fred Craddock.. "I would love to have given my life, but no one ever told me I would not write one big check in life. No, I have had to write forty-five years of little checks -- 87 cents here, 21 cent there. Nibbled away, this giving of life. "Are you able to drink this cup," says Jesus? "Sure, I'm able." One grand quaff and it's down. But, no, no, no, life is just a sip here and a sip there."

So, here's the idea. We're all looking for something in life – something to give ourselves to that will enable us, at the end, to look back and say it was all worthwhile – we'd found something worthwhile to attach ourselves to, or stand up for, or give our very life for.

This is Martin Luther King Jr observance weekend – now there was someone who knew he was going to be martyred. He had no doubt he would give his life.

Few of us are called to that, but look, in the end, we *all* give our lives to something. Right? There's usually something that every one of us has invested heavily in a few coins at a time.

What would you say you have given your life to, so far?

My father worked forty-two years for the "phone company" and died at age 62

never having reached his goal of retirement. I look at his years and think. Wow, he gave his life for AT&T, there is no mistaking it. All his productive years. What is his legacy? Where's the recognition?

There is a passage from the Hebrew Testament book of *Isaiah* that is partnered with what we are looking at this morning in John's gospel. There the prophet, Isaiah, looking backward, feels his life has been a failure.

*The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb God named me.*

*God made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
God made me into a polished arrow*

*And God said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."*

*But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and it has all been in vain. (from Isa 49)*

Passages like this one remind me why I love the Bible so much – every emotion you could ever feel, no matter how rarely, is represented here somewhere.

So look, Isaiah sees himself as gifted. He senses his life has always been in God's hands, but what has it amounted to, he wonders?

I find that so interesting – he feels called by God, absolutely, but he despairs when it comes to what it has been for. I imagine there are a lot of people who feel a similar disconnect in their lives.

Some people are faced with questions about vocational choices. Questions that are difficult to navigate when you are young, for sure, but later comes what is often the harder work of facing the common mid-life malaise that Isaiah faces.

There's a new production of Arthur Miller's classic play, *Death of a Salesman*, on Broadway right now, with a terrific all-black cast. And it is as relevant as ever– the story of a salesman not unlike Isaiah, who has a tongue like a sharp sword but what's it worth in middle- age, the world changing as it does?

You know what I'm talking about, right? It's when we set out in life knowing our gifts and thinking we'd make a mark, but we find everything changes and, in the end it's all so nickel and dime.

There are all kinds of martyrdoms in this life. Anyone who is a parent knows about martyrdoms. Parents have to make little sacrifices all the time. And the attrition of them builds-up on us.

Being a parent is probably the most common, garden-variety nickel and dime martyrdom in life. It carries no glamour. Our society gives lip service to valuing parent's sacrifices, but I don't know, stay-at-home moms don't qualify for social security benefits yet.

Heaven knows, we do our best to remind ourselves what a critically important sacrifice this is. Jackie Kennedy once said, "A person can be the greatest success the world has ever seen, and if he messes up parenting, what good is it?" Pretty amazing words. She said them with her mouth and with her life, too.

"What are you looking for?" What's hanging you up? Where do you feel a failure?

Jesus asks Simon and Andrew that huge question: "What are you looking for?" And their little minds are wondering if there's a place they can sleep that night, and he looks at them with such compassion and says simply, "Come and see."

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

One step at a time. Sometimes doing a small thing can help us heal the hurt of the big things that we are troubled about. Let me explain . . .

I know of a number of people who are in a quandary about their aging parents. They moved to Portland after getting a job offer and took it because it looked to be a good place to raise their children – yep, and here they are, a decade-and-a-half later, and PDX been a good place for them, but, you know, their parents are getting a bit fragile and they live a thousand or two, miles away from them. Every day there is some pain over this. Not a lot, most days, but some. What to do?

I know a Presbyterian woman in San Diego who spoke of how meaningful her service as a deacon in her church was because her parents lived far away in Minnesota. She couldn't live there and care for her folks, but she said what a wonderful gift it was, to be able to serve other people's parents as a deacon.

She said that in a small way, by helping other people's parents she was serving her own. Her take-away from doing that was actually even greater than that. She said that she had learned that life is a lot more interconnected than she ever knew.

Now this idea goes against the prevailing wind in this country today. The wind in this country today is blowing against expanding our idea of family, our idea of country. The prevailing message today is "me first." "America first." "My family, first."

What are you looking for? Be patient; take one step at a time. If your heart aches to do a great big thing far away, okay – but consider this -- maybe God is calling you to do a small thing right here, right now.

Do you feel a failure? Remember that Isaiah did, and look, we are reading his words about his despair 2500 years after he wrote them.

And maybe after he wrote those hard words it later became clear as to why he went through what he went through. That maybe some of those small nickel and dime things he did were bigger than he thought, who knows?

Remember the Tom Hanks film, *Sully* about the heroic landing of the airliner in the Hudson River 14 years ago this week by the aging pilot, Sully Sullenberger. Here is something not in the movie that is completely germane to our discussion this morning,

Sometime after the ditching of the airplane, Sullenberger was interviewed by then news anchor, Katie Couric. She was wondering what made for the remarkable life-saving action of this pilot.

Was it just his talent that made this possible? A worthy question. Captain Sullenberger answered this way.

He said: "One way of looking at this might be that for 42 years, I've been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience, education and training. And on January 15 the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal."

Had he been like most airline pilots, Captain Sullenberger would have retired having thankfully experienced no major aircraft failure on his watch, but one day, in his long career, a perfect storm happened and because he lived faithfully a nickel and dime kind of life, ferrying a million passengers all around the country over many decades, on one particular January day, he had enough in the bank to make a series of small but critical decisions necessary to save 155 lives.

What have you invested in over the years, the decades? Yes, and what might that mean, if push comes to shove?

Amen