

What Are You Looking For?—John 1: 35-42,
January 15, 2023- 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

How do you know when it's time to move on...from a relationship, a job or career, or a faith. It's a tough question. Tough because it means confronting the possibility of loss: losing what you have and all the security and comfort that comes with what you know. It's tough because means confronting fear, fear of an unknown future. In my experience the process of moving on begins when we allow ourselves to get curious and begin asking and answering some simple but profound and fundamental questions; "Is this who I really am?" "What's important to me?" "How did I get here?"

Jesus, in our faith story this morning invites this curiosity with two of John the Baptist's followers, when he asks a simple but profound question; "What are you looking for?" This question takes place in a particular context. This story is part of the larger story John writes about Jesus. Moreover, its part of the story of the whole bible: they are looking for Jesus, the long waited-for and promised Messiah. John, the writer is trying to establish Jesus as the messiah. He does this first by differentiating Jesus from John the Baptist. Many scholars now believe John the Baptist had his own following, that there was a rivalry between John the Baptist's followers and Jesus'. This has historical and contemporary credibility, today in Iraq there exists an ancient sect called the Mandaeans, who reject Jesus, follow the teachings, and perform the rituals of John the Baptist.¹

John the gospel writer is saying it's time to move on. In the other gospels, the other stories of Jesus, the first disciples are asked to move on from an occupation to follow, here they are asked to move on from a religious commitment.² "What are you looking for?" John has Jesus ask. Well. If you are looking for the Messiah, here he is—It's time to move on.

"What are you looking for?" Such a simple yet loaded question. "What are you looking for?" It's a question Megan Phelps-Roper began to ask a few years back. Phelps-Roper grew up in the infamous Westboro Baptist Church, a church founded by her grandfather populated mostly by extended family. In the early two thousands, she and other church members began picketing at the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The church argued that any fatalities endured by American forces were God's punishment for the nation's increasing tolerance of homosexuality. Later they began to protest all things Jewish. Megan, who was in charge of the church's Twitter feed, began receiving challenges to the church's doctrine. She started asking herself what she was up to, and what her church and extended family really believed in. She says, "...Over time, I started to see things that made me think; 'Wait a second, there's

¹ William Loader, *First Thoughts on Year A, Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Epiphany 2*, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtEpiphany2.htm>

² Gail R. O'Day, *Commentary on John, New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. IX, p.530.

something wrong here. This doesn't fit together.”³ “What are you looking for?” God isn't here, the Messiah isn't where you are, it's time to move on.

Those adherents of John move on after Jesus follows up his simple question with an even simpler invitation: “come and see”. “Come and see”, don't take my word for it says Jesus. “Come and see”, Jesus invites curiosity; he speaks to their sense of adventure and play. There's a contemporary Christian worship song that speaks to this invitation, it goes, “He never said, “Come, acknowledge my existence, or “Believe in me, I'm the Second Person of the Trinity!” But 87 times, he said, “Follow me!”⁴ John, the gospel writer doesn't have Jesus demanding belief of his first followers.

Belief is not necessary to start on the Jesus path or even remain on it. Simply “come and see”, see what difference the Jesus path makes in your life, in your world. That's the key, to make that move, to get curious, to begin the adventure. Not merely to believe or to see belief as a barrier, as if Jesus were the answer to a test, but rather to go and see, treating Jesus as a way, a path to the sacred. Jesus' message isn't, “become something you're not for my sake”, it's “Come and see if the path I lay out fits with who you are, with your deepest hopes.” With this invitation, those uncertain, uneasy followers of John the Baptist are ready to move on to the next chapter in their lives.

“Come and see”. “Come and see” where love is calling, “come and see” where love is staying. That's what Megan-Phelps Roper did. Shortly after leaving her family and the church, she said in an interview that she wasn't sure what was next, but she did know that she wants to do good, to have empathy. She feels a responsibility to help the Jewish and gay communities.⁵

“Come and see.” It's rarely an easy invitation to take up. Curiosity can be a threat if you have something to defend, something you don't want to let go. You might just find that the path of Jesus isn't compatible with something you hold dear, that the Messiah isn't where you think he is. Credit to us as a United Church for being willing to go there on our history and our present with 2slgbtq plus people, Indigenous people, racialized people.

As a Council we've been wrestling with how to really live into our commitment to becoming an anti-racist church. Council set up a small task group of which Heather and I are a part to bring back some recommendations. I've noticed myself getting caught up in anxiety about wanting to do this right, not making mistakes, having the perfect step by step plan. In the face of anxiety we want to control, at least I do. Not much faith required in that though is there? It's interesting then that this past week at a meeting of the group I was called to greater faith by the wisdom of another task group member

³ Matthew Hays, *Granddaughters of an infamous homophobic U.S. pastor find grace in Montreal*, Globe and Mail, October 29, 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/after-break-from-westboro-baptists-sisters-find-new-freedom-in-montreal/article15130964/>.

⁴ Bryan Sirchio, lyrics to his song, *Follow Me*.

⁵ Hays.

who kept insisting, “let’s just start with a few simple things and see where they take us.” But I kept wondering about follow up, evaluation, accountability. My anxiety wants a plan, some certainty. She insists, start here and see where it takes us. “Come and see” was her invitation. That’s what we’ll recommend, not so much a plan as a path, a beginning, enough light for the next step and then well, we’ll see.

“What are you looking for?” Answering the question is our work. “Come and see.” The invitation is a gift, it’s grace, it’s God’s offer, not to believe certain things and rid ourselves of doubt, but to join the Messiah and participate in the healing of the world. It’s time to move on, come and see.

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