

“Come and See” / John 1:35-42 / 19 January 2014

The question is, “What are you looking for?” You tag-alongs, you strangers on the road, what are you looking for? Andrew and his friend don't know Jesus from the Buddha or Mohammed; they've just started walking behind Jesus, watching him. And when Jesus realizes that two strangers are stalking him, he doesn't say, “Hey, guys, why are you following me?” He doesn't ask, “What do you want?” No, the question is, “What are you looking for?” And when they cannot answer it—for which of us can?—he supplies the only answer to so probing a question: “Come and see. Come and see.”

It was one of those fearful Sunday mornings, and I sat alone, sweating bullets, in the front pew of a dark but lovely old church in Canton, Ohio. I was cracking my knuckles anxiously, as the elderly congregation stood to sing their “Kyrie Eleisons” and their “Gloria Patris.” I glanced around to survey the crowd. I almost can't believe it now, but back in those days, I always hoped for poor Sunday morning attendance because the bigger the crowd, the bigger my stage fright. There were eighty or ninety worshipers, scattered here and there in a room big enough to seat four-hundred. At twenty-five years of age, I was easily the youngest person there. I should have felt at home in that church, though I'd never set foot inside it before. They were singing songs I knew, murmuring familiar, time-honored words. They were nice people, too. When I got up to speak, they sensed my anxiety, and they smiled at me encouragingly. But I was terrified of public speaking. It still scares me a little. I could have been sick from nervousness.

This was the price I paid for my happy life in Africa: eleven months of sunshine and tropical flowers in a land of endless summer, then one month back in the States, standing in unfamiliar churches on Sunday mornings, tugging at a borrowed necktie, sweating like a condemned man, stammering and clearing my throat as I tried to tell inspiring stories about the work of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. It was a small price to pay, really. Folks in these churches treated me like Johnny, “marching home again” from the front lines, a returning hero of the faith. And though I can't say that I saw myself as a hero, I'll admit to you now in retrospect that I liked it. As much as it scared me to get up and speak in public, I relished the accolades. I was young and hadn't yet learned the wisdom of Jesus' saying, “Beware when all people speak well of you.”

My talk that day was the same one I always gave at all the other churches. It was witty and humorous, self-effacing and deeply respectful of the Africans with whom I worked. Respectful...but all missionary talks have to include a little bit of shock and awe, just to hold people's attention: lush rainforests, tribal witchcraft, beds made of bamboo, waterborne diseases. It was always a great hit to enumerate all the exotic diseases that I had survived. Typhoid. Malaria. And of course, people always wanted to hear about the diet, especially the many meats that we would never consider eating in America. The snakes and lizards, the domestic cats, the rats. All in all, the nervousness faded after I'd been speaking for about five minutes, and the talk went pretty well. When it was all over, a weight of fear came washing off me, and I felt almost lightheaded with relief. I was standing at the back door with the pastor, greeting people as they left the church. Folks crowed, “Oh, what an inspiration! You're such a fine young man. We don't know how fortunate we are in this country. Thank you. Thanks for all you do.” I accepted the compliments awkwardly, but as I said, something inside of me was still immature enough to relish the praises. It was nice to be the returning hero, the one with answers, the one who knew things and did things that others did not.

After a few minutes of this, a certain woman approached me. Aside from myself, she was the youngest person present, about fifty years old, pretty. I remember that she had sad eyes. She paused for a moment, searching for words. Then, gazing at me with an almost compassionate look, she said something that disappointed me, something that has stayed with me for two decades. She said, “I hope you find what you're looking for.” I gaped at her, at a loss for words. There was not a trace of irony or sarcasm in her voice. She had spoken gently and meant what she said. I wanted to tell her, “No! You're wrong about me! I'm not looking for anything! You're supposed to be moved and inspired by my Africa stories. You're supposed to say nice things, like all these other folks are doing. You're

supposed to admire me.” She smiled again, a little sadly, perhaps fearing that she'd said too much, then she disappeared forever. I never saw her again and surely never will. But she returns to me from time to time. There are still days when her sad eyes peer at me, across the years, times when I'm feeling self-satisfied, as I did on that day, times when I'm feeling smug, or proud, or special. At those times, her genuine expression of concern comes back to me. “I hope you find what you're looking for.”

Back in those days, I liked to flatter myself that I was not looking for anything. But truly, if a guy relocates to the equatorial rainforests, it's pretty safe to say that he's searching for something. And people who watch birds are looking for something. And people who sit in front of TVs, and who make quilts, and who surf the web. People who stare into their open refrigerators (despite the fact that they aren't even hungry) are typically looking for something that no refrigerator on the planet contains. We who sit in pews are certainly looking for something. We are, all of us, looking for something, even those of us who have already found the thing we most love; we continue to search for it and find it again and again in every new situation that we face. The quest is not a bad thing. Only pity the one who has abandoned it altogether and settled for less than enough. Seeking is good. It's the journey of faith. “What are you looking for?” Jesus asks. “Come and see. Come and see.”

It's a curious story in the Gospel of John, one that's always puzzled me a little. This is radically different from the stories we find in the other three gospels about how the disciples began to follow Jesus. In this telling, John the Baptist suggests to his own followers, Andrew and his unnamed friend, that Jesus would really make a better rabbi for them. He's the “Lamb of God,” John says, “who takes away the sin of the world.” And so Andrew and his friend decide to drop old John the Baptist and go tagging along behind Jesus. Sensing that he's being followed, Jesus turns around and asks the most curious question of all: What are you looking for? They stammer, because, well, how do you answer such an unexpected question, such a forward question? Who even asks what you're looking for, unless it's a salesperson who sees you rifling through the racks at a clothing store. “What are you looking for?” Most of us don't really know what we're looking for. “Um, er, well...where do you live?” they manage to reply. Jesus' answer is very simply, “Come and see. Come and see.” What are you looking for? Even you don't fully know. Just come and see. So they go, and they see, and their lives and our world would never be the same again.

And you in your pew, you whose face is familiar but whose story we only know in part, you with your unnamed desires, your persistent worries, your satisfactions, your regrets! You with your allegiances, your dreams, your loves. You with your secrets that you will never, never tell. What are *you* looking for?

M. Scott Peck said that some people come to religion to find mystery, and others come to escape it. Some come looking for wonder; others come looking for certainties. And there are surely legions of other reasons people bring their life-quests within the bounds of the church: they like the sense of community; or they feel that the church accomplishes worthwhile things in the world; or they crave ritual, or reverence, or music, or words. I've known people who come to church just because they like to spend an hour of their week in a beautiful space. So many of the places in our lives are not beautiful, our homes, our workplaces, and the soul truly does crave beauty. It could be the stories of faith that bring some people to church, parables to live by. We're all searching for something. And all of us here present have brought our own private quests to the church. We come with a multitude of desires and expectations. I believe that there is room here for all our many quests, for when Andrew and his friend go following after Jesus, he doesn't sit them down and tell them what to believe; he bids them “Come and see.” And from that point, they enter into a lifelong journey. It's not about having hard and fast answers to every question. It's about journeying together through the days that life sends. It's about throwing your individual energies and talents into something bigger than yourself, something further reaching, longer lasting, and infinitely wiser than any of us could ever be alone. What are you looking for? Whoever you are, I'm quite certain that you are looking for meaningful ways to live your life, for matters of great importance into which you can invest yourself. You're looking exactly for the

journey. Or to use another metaphor, I believe that each of us longs to join our own personal stories to a larger story, the story of a congregation, the story of a faith tradition, the story of the Galilean.

The poet Kathleen Norris moved to the plains of South Dakota, where her family had lived and had deep roots. One day she had a conversation in a tavern with an old cowboy, who sought her out because she was from "one of the old families." He wanted to tell her about a side saddle he owned, made by his great grandfather as a wedding present some 150 years ago. She tells of how they mused awhile on the subject of their ancestors, telling old stories, when suddenly the old man said, "Who are we and where do we come from?" (That's the real question, isn't it?) Before Norris could reply, he smiled and said, "And here we are telling each other lies." "Not lies, stories!" she said, laughing. "Call them stories!" "Stories!" he nearly shouted back, pounding one hand on the bar. "That's who we are! We're stories." Each of us is a collection of stories. Some of them are remembered, but most are lost with time. We are, all of us, a bundle of stories. Some of those stories are funny and some are sad. Some are frightening and others are, frankly, pretty dull. But it's who we are, and it's what we've got. When we try to tell others who we are, and what we value, and what things have shaped us, it's the stories that we tell. When Jesus tells Andrew and his friend to come and see what they're looking for, he's inviting them into his own story, a story that is captured now in the stained glass of medieval churches, in icons and mosaics, a story that has been translated into nearly every language, a story that lives on in you and me.

Ah, the stories that we tell ourselves, that we tell each other! Amid all the changes of this world, in the end, it is our stories that define us. After just a few years of marriage, a man and a wife found that they were fighting all the time. They were about to call the marriage quits, when they decided as a last ditch effort to go and see a marriage counselor. On their first appointment, they sat across the desk from their therapist, and he asked them both to tell their stories. The man didn't have much to say. He talked about a time when his wife forgot his birthday, a few other times when she said unkind things to him. When the wife's turn came to talk, she found no shortage of stories to tell about her husband. He winks at waitresses; he complains about her cooking; he pays more attention to the dog than to her. After the wife had finished speaking, the therapist walked around his desk and kissed her passionately on the lips. He looked at the husband and said, "Your wife needs that at least twice a week." The man replied, "I'll bring her by on Tuesdays and Thursdays." Yes, storytelling can get a person in trouble.

What are you looking for? I like the fact that, when Jesus decides that Andrew and his friend are "looking for" something, he doesn't sit them down and tell them what to believe. He doesn't tell them what books they really ought to read. He doesn't give them a catechism to recite. No, he says, "Come and see what it is that you're looking for." Then he invites them on a journey. He invites them into the big story of God's redemption of a broken world. As much as we want hard and fast answers to all our life's greatest questions, we don't often get them. No, we get a collection of stories and an invitation to a lifelong journey.

Sometimes I think back on that insightful woman, two decades ago, who hoped I would find what I was looking for. In one sense, I have found it. I've discovered that faith is not a goal to be attained and then held tight, but a lifelong process, a journey, an ever-changing story. I've found the wisdom to embrace mystery, the great unknowing, and the peace of mind to actually be grateful that I don't have all the answers. In another sense, I haven't yet found it, for the journey is the destination, and the story never ends. What are you looking for? Will you ever find it? Never fear! It's your story, yes, but it's not entirely about you. It's your journey, yes, but not yours alone. We, all of us, share in this story, this journey. But in the end, it is Christ's story, Christ's journey, and it is he who seeks you