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First Presbyterian Church
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John 1:29-42

“Come and See”

“What are you looking for?”

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Those are the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel According to John, which probably makes them important. It’s a heartfelt question, and it deserves our time and attention to stop, ponder, discern, and ask, “What are we looking for?”

In your heart, in your secret and quiet places, what are the hungers that drive you forward in your life? As you say goodbye to an old year and welcome a new one, what are you hoping for, asking for, and looking for, in your life?

For me, there’s something about a new year that makes me stop, pause, reflect and consider “what am I looking for this year? What do I want this year to look like?” A new year is so ripe for new beginnings and possibilities, that for me it’s hard not to think about what might be in store. It’s also a chance to slow down from the busy-ness of Christmas, to take stock, and to consider what direction might God be calling me, or . . . what direction might God be calling you to take?

This was my motivation behind this sermon series “This is my story.” For you see, God calls all of us; we all have calling, a vocation. Not just those of us who are called to ministry. We all have a calling. In fact, it was the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther in particular who came up with the revolutionary idea that God has something in mind for each and every one of us; that God calls all of us; that each of us has a vocation. Luther called it the “priesthood of all believers” and said being a good and honest butcher or shoemaker was as holy a vocation as being a priest for the church. Therefore becoming a homemaker, military officer, doctor, social worker, salesperson, accountant, broker, trader, organist, police officer, attorney or professional athlete can all be a calling.

The difficulty, of course, is knowing and discerning what are you looking for? What part of God’s major work plan is yours to do? How do you know what your

assignment is? That is the hard question. How do you know your vocation, your very own calling? Conventional wisdom, perhaps informed by too many movies, is that God calls us in a voice in the night, a voice that sounds a lot like James Earl Jones.

But this isn't how it happens for most of us. As you heard last week it didn't for Max, and it didn't for me; that would be too easy. Like Max, I also sensed a call to ministry at a young age – about 15 – which reflecting on it now seems both brave and bombastic. What in the world does a 15-year-old know about a life calling? Not much, which could also be why it scared me. You see, no one in my family was a minister. For the most part they were business people – a manufacturer, a banker – things of that nature. But we always went to church; church was a very important part of our lives. My Dad was an Elder; my Mom grew up in the same church I grew up in and my parents were married in; all 5 of us were baptized there; I got married there as did my sister; and I was ordained there twice: once as a Deacon when I was in high school, and again in 1996 as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament. I was 25 years old, and had just graduated from seminary the week prior.

In the Presbyterian Church we aren't ordained upon graduation, though. We graduate from seminary with a Masters of Divinity degree, as if anyone can master the divine! – but we aren't ordained until we receive a call – a job. Now if anyone had told me when I entered seminary that my first call would be as an Executive Director of a community ministry that I would start, I would have told them they were off their rocker. I was going to be an Associate Pastor, because that's what I saw women in the ministry doing. But life took a turn when I fell in love and got married to a classmate, something else I swore I would never do. So I guess lesson one in discerning your vocation is to never be too sure of yourself, because God often has other plans.

I loved my ministry at Interfaith Caregivers. It was also the last thing I ever expected to do, and so sensing a call to be a Pastor – because really, that's where my heart is even on the tough days, Terry and I started looking for a new call not long after starting a family. We wound up in St. Louis where my sister lives and I think you know the rest: I served 18 years at the same church, which was also probably something I never would have guessed – and then when I sensed God

was calling me to a new chapter, God led me here. And I also believe God led you to me. And this is an important piece of being called, and why we don't graduate ordained with the title Reverend. Presbyterians don't believe in a one-way call, no matter how much you think you hear the voice of James Earl Jones; there have to be multiple parties involved. The person called, the church or organization doing the calling, the presbytery, of which ministers are a member. Our calls always have to be affirmed. This is true of elders and deacons, too. Your call, if you've been ordained, is recognized by a nominating committee and confirmed by the congregation.

And this is important, and here I'll share an opinion that has not always been popular through the years, and it's this: it's not all about you. Nor is it all about me. It is ultimately, and always, about God. God does the calling. And God does the calling whether we feel ready and equipped or not. We tend to forget this, I think. We tend to believe we must have everything figured out, have all our ducks lined up, our lives in order before we can answer God's call. But friends, it rarely if ever works that way.

I mean, I was 22 years old when I started seminary. I'd just graduated from college 6 weeks prior. What did I know? Not much. I thought I did! But I didn't. Not really. I mean, I'd done some things to prepare me – worked at the presbytery's camp one summer, held an internship or two, spent a summer in Alaska for the PCUSA – so I had some cred, but not much. And like most seminary students, I entered believing some things for certain, and graduated with many of those certainties upended.

The funny thing about being called is that you really don't know how the whole thing is going to pan out until you start. Our friend Michael Lindvall once preached a sermon about that, about how it's come and see, not see and come. We don't first see and believe and then go. We go and then see and believe.

And I'll be honest and admit that there's a piece of me that still has an issue with that. When the question "What are you looking for?" is posed to me, my first response is to jump into action and figure out how we're going to get there! My pragmatic side takes over, and I start thinking 3 steps ahead, 6 months down the road. So one of the hardest things for me, even 27 professional years into my call, is to stop, slow down, and consider the question, "What am I looking for?" and

come to the truth that the only way I'm going to get there, and the only way you're going to get there, is to abide with Jesus; to follow his invitation to come and see.

"Come and see," Jesus said to the disciples. And the disciples did and stayed with Jesus all afternoon. But of course, we know they stayed with Jesus longer than that. About 3 years in fact. Followed him all the way to the end, and even after that – spreading his gospel to Jerusalem and beyond. To the far reaches of the earth. To you, and to me.

It's an astonishing way to find one's true passion in life, don't you think? By following some stranger home, staying with him an afternoon, and deciding "this is it. This is my calling. To follow that guy." It's crazy! If any of our children did that we'd freak out. A college professor of mine once said the prime people to run off and join a cult are recent college graduates. I don't exactly remember the reason why. But maybe it's because they're young, idealistic, and have nothing else to do. Maybe the disciples were young, idealistic, and had nothing else to do. Maybe they got tired of fishing, which was the family business for some of them; maybe Matthew got tired of collecting taxes, and figured "why not"? And so they left their parents behind . . . who were no doubt scratching their heads, wondering where they'd gone wrong.

But friends, when you really think about it, finding one's true passion in life isn't found by following a logical path but by listening for God's call and having the courage to follow. But how do we listen for God's call among the din of voices? How do we separate out God's voice from all others, including our own?

The writer Frederick Buechner answers those questions with this advice:

"By and large a good rule for finding out (your calling) is this: the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. ... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (118-19).

I love that: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Friends, there wasn't any logic at work when the disciples decided to follow Jesus. None at all. But if they had never followed him home that day, they would never

have discovered their true passion in life – the place where their deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet. But finding our true passion in life isn’t found by following a logical path – as much as it pains me to say that -- but by listening for God’s call and having the courage to follow when Jesus says “Come and see”. This assumes we’re willing to do a certain amount of introspection, and to live in the messy times of transition. It means we’re willing to listen to our lives, both the exciting peaks as well as the deep, dark valleys. And this is important, and something we don’t always think about. Quaker theologian Parker Palmer suggests that sometimes God’s call comes in experiences of disappointment. Sometimes our plans, our hopes, our aspirations, don’t pan out. We don’t get the job, we’re not accepted in the graduate program we know would launch our career. Sometimes the answer is “no” and we are crushed. But, Palmer says, when a door closes behind us, the whole world opens up in a new way ahead of us.

As you think about 2023, and what you’re looking for, what your calling is, ask yourself:

Where are the moments of surprise laughter? Where are those moments of happy tears?

Pay attention to them, Buechner insists. Pay attention to those moments. Because they’re telling you something deeply important about yourself. Even more, such moments are whispering something about the kind of work God has given you to do. Because God doesn’t only give work to people like me, to do – those of us who have made a career out of God, so to speak. God’s given all of us a vocation. That vocation may end up being how you make a living, but many times it’s not. It’s what we do in the other hours of our week, and it’s what excites us and nourishes us and keeps us sane. It is, as Buechner said, the place where our deep gladness, and the world’s deep hunger, meet.

What are you looking for?

What are you looking for?

Amen.

Dear God, whose love knows no ending, we know this life is beautiful and difficult and sometimes both at the same time. We ask that you support and protect us while we are in it. We ask that you would send us out from this service to bear witness in word and deed to your grace, goodness and love. May we hear your voice calling us at home and at work, at school and at church, and the places we gather and volunteer, that we might feel and share your love. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the one set apart and made holy for us. Amen.

John 1:29-42 Common English Bible

²⁹The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.' ³¹Even I didn't recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel." ³²John testified, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. ³³Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" ³⁴I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son."

Jesus calls disciples

³⁵The next day John was standing again with two of his disciples. ³⁶When he saw Jesus walking along he said, "Look! The Lamb of God!" ³⁷The two disciples heard what he said, and they followed Jesus.

³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he asked, "What are you looking for?"

They said, "Rabbi (which is translated *Teacher*), where are you staying?"

³⁹He replied, "Come and see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

⁴⁰One of the two disciples who heard what John said and followed Jesus was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. ⁴¹He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated *Christ*^[a]). ⁴²He led him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which is translated *Peter*).