

***What Are You Looking For?***  
A Sermon Preached by the  
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Isaiah 49:1-7  
John 1:29-42

As I was doing some reading this past week, I came across this reminder, “We will be dealing with John’s Gospel from time to time this coming year, particularly during the season of Lent. Or perhaps it will be more accurate to say that John’s Gospel will be dealing with us!”<sup>1</sup>

John’s Gospel always requires a shift in our thinking, often because it is so different from the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke; and because it isn’t regularly rotated into the common lectionary. If you’re familiar with the lectionary, you know that the Synoptic Gospels roll around every three years, with Matthew being Year A, Mark, Year B, and Luke, Year C, each combined with a lesson from the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures, a Psalm, and an Epistle from the New Testament. And once in a while, there’s a run on the Gospel of John.

In John, we have a very different Jesus. He never drives out a demon, is never described as one who heals or cures. There is no birth narrative, no parables, and very few narrative miracles. He spends the three years of his ministry - as opposed to one year in the Synoptics - in and around Jerusalem, not in Galilee. And Jesus doesn’t talk about the reign of God, which is his ministry in the Synoptic Gospels. It has been described as the “spiritual” Gospel, used more for individual meditation. It doesn’t talk about the human Jesus; it makes theological claims, not historical statements; it’s the disciples remembering and interpreting, and there’s no way we can easily reconcile the Jesus we find in the Synoptic Gospels with the one we find in the Gospel of John.

Similarly, in the Synoptic Gospels, it is John the Baptist who baptizes Jesus, and while John admits seeing the Holy Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus in the Gospel of John, and says that he has seen and testified that this is the Son of God, he also says, “I myself did not know him,” two

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willamon, “The Real Jesus We Really Don’t Know,” *Pulpit Resource*, January 2002, p. 16.

different times in the lesson we read today. “Here is the Lamb of God, but I myself did not know him.”

And then there’s the puzzling exchange between Jesus and John’s disciples that we want to spend some time with this morning. Again, as he watches Jesus walk by, John – his cousin John – says to his own disciples, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” whereupon they apparently decide that following Jesus is a better deal than following John, because they promptly walk away in pursuit of Jesus.

It is at that point that Jesus turns, sees them walking behind him, following him, and asks them, “What are you looking for?” What are you looking for?

It’s not a throwaway question, although at any given moment in our lives, we’re probably looking for everything from perfect happiness to the car keys, which is sometimes one and the same thing! It’s not a throwaway question, even though we are asked it on a daily basis by everybody from sales clerks at Macy’s to our spiritual directors. Sometimes it comes with variation. Every time I check out at Byerly’s the cashier says, “Did you find everything you were looking for today?” I’m often tempted to say, “No, I’m still looking for perfect happiness, “ or “No, I still haven’t found a way to bring peace to the world. But, yes, I have found everything I was looking for to make dinner tonight, so we can leave happiness and world peace for another day.”

Instead of saying, “Follow me,” Jesus says, “What are you looking for?” And instead of giving him an answer, like, “We’re looking for the meaning of life,” they ask him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” One preacher notes that it “sounds suspiciously like they’re angling for an invitation to lunch” – which is essentially what they get. That same preacher goes on, “Come and see,” Jesus says, and they go with him and spend the day there, and at the end, one of them, Andrew, finds his brother Simon and tells him the most astonishing thing: ‘We just found the Messiah,’ which is a way of saying, ‘We just found the truth.’ And he persuades Simon to come and see, and he does, and Jesus renames him Peter, and the rest is history. The Christian enterprise begins.”<sup>2</sup>

What are you looking for? UCC preacher Catherine Taylor answers it another way: “What we are all looking for without even knowing it is a place to stay, a place to remain always. Jesus is that place, a person who is himself a home, a place to belong, a whole way of life. Jesus knows that

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<sup>2</sup> John M Buchanan, “Looking,” Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois, January 23, 2005.

what the disciples really want is a place to belong. Whatever he sees on the faces of these two men panting in front of him after running down the street, whatever he sees, what he says to them is just right and wonderfully inviting: ‘Come and see.’ They do go with him. They end up staying, and his story becomes their way of life.”<sup>3</sup> Again, the rest is history. The Christian enterprise begins.

Now it’s interesting to think about the twists and turns in the road that this Christian enterprise has encountered along the way, too many for us to talk about this morning, certainly. But one of the most recent research endeavors that continues to interest me, looks at generational differences, specifically in the church. Everybody breaks it down a little differently, and I’m sure you’re familiar with other terms like GenX and the Millennials. The Barna Group, probably one of the best known of these research groups, defines generational differences along these lines:

- Mosaics – those born between 1984 and 2002, or the six to twenty-four year olds
- Busters – those born between 1965 and 1983, the twenty-five to forty-four year olds
- Boomers – born between 1946 and 1964, the forty-five to sixty-two year olds
- Builders – born between 1927 and 1945, those sixty-three to eighty-one
- And Seniors – those born prior 1926 and earlier, the eighty and ninety year olds.

Some of their most recent research findings tell us that Mosaics are less likely than any other generation to volunteer their time to the church, the least likely to indicate that faith is a very important part of their lives, and the least likely to pray. That’s not much of a surprise. Many of us could think back to our early twenties and say the same thing.

Busters – those twenty-five to forty-four year olds – are more likely than any other generation to be searching for meaning in their life. They are also the ones most likely to feel “too busy” and stressed out.

Church attendance breaks down this way: 33% of the Mosaics, 43% of the Busters, 49% of the Boomers, 53% of the Builders and Seniors combined attend church on a given Sunday – which would be apparent in

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Taylor, “What Are You Looking For?” First Congregational UCC, Ithaca, New York, January 20, 2008.

just about any mainline Protestant church you choose to walk into on a Sunday morning.<sup>4</sup>

Another way that this gets played out is in the fairly recent phenomenon known as “church-hopping.” Not “church-shopping,” but “church-hopping.” One writer notes that, “Most churches are unprepared for the new ground rules. They watch in bewilderment as their membership rolls turn over or even decline.”

The choice of a church used to be a much simpler matter. Most people stuck with one denomination, often the one they grew up in or married into, or one determined by ethnicity or geography. Those doctrinal and denominational lines have gotten blurred, and our option-driven consumer culture has changed the equation. Church-hopping has become a way of life for many.

One young person called himself “bi-churchal,” and said, “I go to one church where I can grow spiritually, participate in a Gen-Xer worship service, and serve to make a global impact. I go to another, new church on Sunday evening to contribute to my local community through service there. Why should my attendance be an either/or? Why can’t it be both/and? This fulfills me. I don’t think church hopping has to be a negative.”<sup>5</sup>

There are other complicating factors like lifestyle changes. In 2001, the average working couple logged 717 more office hours in a year than they did in 1969. That statistic can only have gotten higher. It leaves little time to attend a church, much less stick with one. And attending sporadically keeps many people from getting deeply involved anywhere.

That’s really new thinking for most of us. We may find ourselves wondering if anybody is still looking for a place to call home, if an invitation to “come and see” will generate any interest in stopping long enough to hear the stories and live the questions and call it home.

Some contend that it’s a values issue more than a generational one. One researcher says, “Postmoderns, whatever their age, do it for spiritual reasons.” They’re looking for spiritual depth. “They want a church with a unique calling and identity, one that will go with them on an adventurous spiritual journey.” And then he notes, “Most churches don’t offer this.”<sup>6</sup> That’s a pretty sobering thought and should make us wonder if we’ve got enough substance to be worthy of being hopped to!

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<sup>4</sup> The Barna Group, “Generational Differences”, [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Phifer, “Church-Hopping Trend Becoming More Common,” 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

John Buchanan, the senior pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, puts it this way: “One of the most intriguing ideas I know, an idea I have come to love, is that God is the source of the basic question we ask, the idea that God has created us to look and seek and search. God has created us, someone noted, with a ‘God-sized hole in our hearts’ that nothing but God can fill.”

What are you looking for? Buchanan’s bottom line answer is this: “no matter who we are or how old we are and no matter what we do for a living and how much money we have, . . . we are all, in some way or another, looking for God, looking for a place to be, where we are welcome and at home, looking for someone to follow, something big and important enough to commit our lives to.”<sup>7</sup> Come and see.

What are you looking for? It’s a question worth wrestling with – as individuals, as congregations, as communities. Because our answers, on all of those levels, have a great deal to do with what’s next, as well as the journey we take to get there. What motivates us? What is it that we really need personally, not just on the surface, but deep down in the core of our being? And what are our hopes and dreams and visions for this church? What are we looking for?

That’s not a throwaway question either. Because how we answer it has a great deal to do with how we envision ourselves as a community of faith ten to twenty to fifty years down the road, how we understand the new cultural paradigm we’re living in, and how we decide what’s important in calling a new pastor.

Sometime in the next few weeks, you’re going to have a chance to weigh in on some of the ways we answer that question. At their last meeting, the session approved using a congregational survey designed specifically for churches in a pastoral search. Each and every member will be asked to complete it, and the higher the rate of return, the more accurate data we will have. It will provide us with important information about our identity, our expectations, our mission and outreach. In other words, it will help us discover what it is about this particular congregation that is unique in terms of being a place to call home, a place where we find something big and important enough to commit our lives to.

In the meantime, the thing that moves us from “What are you looking for?” to “Come and see,” is the story that we’ve been called to tell. Catherine Taylor says it’s the only story the church has to tell, the story of

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<sup>7</sup> Buchanan, “Looking.”

its home, the place from which we draw hope and strength and power. That place is a person, and the best way to tell his story – perhaps the only way – is with our lives.”<sup>8</sup>

Faith doesn't begin with the Sunday morning liturgy or a creed or a denominational order. It begins with an act of hospitality, it begins with an invitation to coffee, a conversation, a relationship. Think about the end of the story, think about Andrew, who, having spent the day with Jesus, can't wait to tell his brother Simon Peter, “Come and see. Come and see. We have found the Messiah. We have found what we were looking for.”

What are you looking for? Come and see. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor, “What Are You Looking For?”