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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

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2 Epiphany, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 40:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

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“What are you looking for?” says Jesus to these earnest two disciples.

Such a good question.

Those are the very first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel according to John. John’s gospel opens with the cosmic hymn of praise we hear at Christmastime: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” Then the scene shifts to the Jordan River where John is baptizing, and the passage we heard this morning. Two of John the Baptist’s disciples go and follow Jesus. And he opens his mouth for the first time, and the Word of God speaks, not a statement but a question: “What are you looking for?”

One of the things I've learned, yet have to keep re-learning, after 44 years on this planet is that it doesn't matter so much what *I* think someone needs as what *they* think they need. Maybe you've had this experience too: your friend, or your spouse, or your child, comes to talk to you about a problem. You're listening supportively and suddenly it dawns on you: in your great wisdom, you know just what they need to do! So you stop listening, and start giving advice—only to see their expression grow distant. It turns out advice wasn't what they were looking for. They wanted to be heard.

As a pastor I've sometimes had the experience of offering prayer and empathy, when what someone was really looking for was food for a hungry belly or a dry pair of socks. But at least as often, I've had the experience of jumping in to try to fix someone's problems when what they were really looking for was just someone to listen to them, take them seriously, and pray with them.

The famous psychologist Abraham Maslow suggested that human beings have a hierarchy of needs. At the most basic level are physical needs like food, air, water, and sleep. When those needs are satisfied, we can turn our attention to meeting slightly higher-level needs for shelter, safety, and stability. At the levels above that, we seek to meet social needs for love and belonging, and then personal ego needs for things like recognition, power, prestige, and self-esteem. Once those are met, Maslow believed, we have the highest need of all, which he called self-actualization: a need for creativity and personal growth. A drive to develop our gifts and be our best self. Maslow thought you had to meet the needs at a lower level before being able to focus on the higher ones. But that may not be completely true. Even in desperate poverty, people still want to be liked and respected; invest great energy in love and friendships; express themselves artistically.

It may be truer to say that we all have needs at every level of the pyramid. But of course sometimes one need is more urgent than another, and only the person experiencing it gets to say what they're truly looking for. So I love that Jesus begins his ministry here not with a prescription but with a question. "What are *you* looking for?"

Now of course as the Gospel of John unfolds Jesus won't *only* ask questions. He's make a lot of statements. And what's remarkable is how many of them fit a simple pattern: "I am." "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am the Messiah." "I am the gate for the sheep." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the true vine." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Scholars call these the "I am sayings" of John's Gospel. They're distinctive in part because "I am" is famously the name of God as God revealed it to Moses, way back in the book of Exodus, speaking out of a burning bush. Moses asks who God is, and God's answer is, "I am." So when Jesus over and over repeats these words, there's an echo of the name of God and a claim to God's authority.

But I think these "I am" sayings also tell us something else, something related to this first moment with these disciples. They tell us that whatever we are looking for, we can find it in Jesus. Physical needs: I am bread, I am water, I am light. Security needs: I am the shepherd, I am the gate, I am the way. Needs for belonging: I am the vine, you are the branches; abide in me. And higher-level needs, a self-actualization beyond anything we could have imagined: I am the truth. I am the resurrection. I am the life.

Now for these two disciples of John, what they are looking for, it seems, is the Messiah: the anointed one. That's what Andrew tells his brother they've found. A figure of Jewish expectation, the chosen leader who will set Israel free. And Jesus will meet that expectation, although not exactly in the way Andrew and Peter expect. Not a military leader or a king, but one who will bring a new kind of freedom from the power of evil and death itself.

This morning we also heard St. Paul writing to the Corinthian church, a church he had founded. Now the Christians in Corinth were mostly Gentiles. When Paul first came to preach to them, they certainly hadn't been looking for a Messiah. They were looking for other things. But Jesus was what they needed too. And people of every possible time and place and culture have found what they are looking for in Jesus ever since as his movement and his salvation have cascaded down through the ages in the unfolding epiphany of God's love even to today.

What are you looking for? Whatever it is, Jesus can offer it—though like those early disciples, it might come in a way different from what you'd been expecting. If you seek food, Jesus will provide a community that's called to feed the hungry with very real physical sustenance, plus a spiritual food beyond anything you've known. If you seek love and belonging, Jesus and his friends have it to offer. If you seek power, Jesus offers that too, though it's the power not of the sword but of the cross. If you seek justice, Jesus insists that all are equal in God's eyes and offers the strength to keep walking the path until that vision is reality.

So come and find what you are looking for. But be warned: Jesus will meet your needs beyond what you've ever imagined. But he'll also enlist you in meeting the needs of others. And he won't stop until the world is transformed, not just into what any of us is looking for, but into what God has been looking for through all eternity.