

Sermon on John 1:29-42
Second Sunday of Epiphany, January 15, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Every morning when I open the email on my computer to begin the day's work - actually, every time I go online - I find scores of email messages that I don't want or need. They are mostly from advertisers telling me what they think I need (according to what my children or I have "ordered online" in the past). So I get advertisements from Best Buy because they think I am looking for electronics or a new smart tv, from MyPillow because last year I bought one pillow and got one free (ha!), Yummly thinks I am looking for new recipes, and Epson thinks I am looking for new ink cartridges. The list goes on, but I know you get the point. Advertisers want desperately to know what you and I are looking for, so that they can tell us how much they can provide which will satisfy our needs. So *what are you looking for?* This is not just a question for shoppers: this is an existential question, one which people of faith have asked for centuries, from ancient times.

In today's gospel reading we find this question highlighted. It begins with John the Baptist (again), pointing to Jesus, saying "*Look! Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" Remember, John was the one whom people asked if HE were Elijah, or the Messiah for whom they had waited. John said it wasn't him - in other words "*it's not about me.*" This one, Jesus, was the one for whom they waited, the anointed one of God who would save the whole world (not just the people of Israel). Last Sunday, on the Baptism of our Lord, we heard how the Spirit of God descended (or hovered over) Jesus like a dove, identifying Jesus as God's Son. So, two of John's disciples began to follow Jesus. Noticing two new followers, one of them named Andrew - the brother of Peter - Jesus turned to them and asked them, "*What are you looking for?*" The two new disciples wanted to know where Jesus was staying, so Jesus said "*Come and see.*" So everything started with a simple question that Jesus asked two who were following him on the road: ***What are you looking for? What are you seeking?***

This is where it all starts for us today, doesn't it? When we stop and think about the world around us, about all that is going on and how we fit in or don't fit in, and sometimes we ask that basic question of faith, *what does God have to do with all of this? What does God have to do with me, and what do I have to do with God - and my neighbor - the people around me?* That's more than one question, I know, but when we start searching for meaning, it brings us back to the essential question. We might ask "how long O Lord, must we suffer? How long before we get the answers? How will we be saved?" and many more. But the question Jesus asks you and me today is: ***What are you searching for?***

And the beauty of Jesus' answer is not found today in a long theological explanation, a book of teachings or a "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus' response to his first two followers, one of them named Andrew, was simply **"Come and see."** Come along, follow me – Jesus – watch what happens, what I say and do, and seek to understand what it means, and how God loves you, your neighbor, and the world. It's an opportunity to observe and participate, not just listen and learn!

Lots of people are searching for answers these days – actually, everyone is, because nobody has everything figured out! Some are seeking a leader that they can follow, someone or something to believe in. Some are seeking security in uncertain, fearful times. Some are searching for stability and peace, in a world of turmoil and war. Some are seeking hope in times of despair. In 2017 there is a lot of searching and uncertainty, because nobody knows what will happen next. Are these concerns for you? They certainly are for me!

Every generation has known times of uncertainty and chaos, and had to deal with it. Between the World Wars, in the 1920s and 30s, people dealt with the uncertainty after World War I's destruction in Europe, a Great Depression, the rise of fascism and Nazism, and dictators like Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, who took advantage and seized power. Many became confused and idolized Hitler, which led to so much death and destruction, but even so, there were people of faith like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other who followed the example of Jesus to call Nazism "idolatry" and profess faith in the one true God who teaches us to love. After World War II during the Cold War, people began facing the reality of racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws in the United States. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr and many others spoke up and led the work to dismantle white European colonialism and laws of racial segregation, fighting for the right to vote and to work, for justice in education, housing and health care. Many of them suffered and died in that fight. But many based their words and actions on the values of faith professed by the Hebrew prophets and by Jesus. Many of us in the Church are searching for that same strength, determination and clarity of faith, which can lead us today in our struggle to make the values of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and compassion the values which guide our nation and the people of this world.

Many people are seeking guidance from God in all of this, but don't know how because they don't know or trust the church or its leaders. Not because churches and pastors are untrustworthy, but because they haven't grown up knowing any, they don't know what Christian faith is about, and all they see or hear are so-called religious leaders who either are just in it for the money, or preach a gospel of hate, exclusion and damnation. So they won't listen or hear. Still, many people are searching for the "true Church", or the real voice of God, which they still can find in the words of Jesus, in Moses and the prophets, or in Islam, and the prophet Mohammed. People still seek truth from their faith.

So there is still hope – for faith, if not for the Church as it has been. Too often we in the Church are so distracted by the hard work of keeping our congregations alive and buildings open that we don't have the strength and energy (or just forget) to do the real work of the Church! Which is not only to praise God (which we still do rather well), but also to bear witness to the good news of Jesus in this world, to care for others, and to love God AND OUR NEIGHBOR AS OURSELVES – with our acts of love, welcome and compassion - *sometimes using words!* What are you looking for, Jesus asked? In order to find what we are seeking, Jesus said, “Come and see!” So, what do you and I see in the work of congregations, and this church? What do others see? I guess it all depends on who you ask, and their experience.

Let's go back to 1963. The world watched as civil rights demonstrators were jailed, beaten by police, set upon by dogs, and school children were sprayed by fire hoses on the street, as they marched against racial discrimination in Birmingham, Alabama. For Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the fight against racial discrimination and for the right to vote was a witness of faith. Some clergy in Birmingham didn't see it that way, and were disturbed by the violence against the demonstrators, and said the world wasn't ready, so advised waiting for a more opportune time. Dr. King replied with his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, a challenge to the church to see the work against racism as the work of faith in its time. He said that:

“The judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.”

In 2017, the 21st century, this already is the case, I fear. Too many people, and especially young people, have dismissed the Church and “organized religion” as irrelevant to their lives. So even when we do speak out, or act in opposition to injustice in our world, we aren't even noticed because people aren't listening. However, today, in the month of January in 2017, maybe people are beginning to listen, because they are afraid. They may listen to a voice that brings them hope. There are bullying voices of fear and anger, which found willing, receptive ears in 2016. But just like in the era of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, there is another voice of hope, which comes from those who preach a message of hope, compassion, and love for our neighbor.

Last month, early in December, we heard the call as people of faith to respond to the fears of undocumented immigrants. They heard loud and clear the chants of “*build that wall*” or “*send them back*” at political rallies in 2016. They see the legislation being written and proposed in Congress in the dark of night,

even while the media is obsessed with tweets or unverified gossip. So 450 churches on the East and West coasts, and 14 churches so far in Minnesota, have committed ourselves to a reborn “Sanctuary Movement” for undocumented immigrants, who have real fears of deportation. (We are going to talk about this in the forum following worship today, downstairs.) So – come and see!

Last week we saw national legislation begun in Congress to repeal the Affordable Health Care act without a replacement, and we see in Minnesota how insurance companies have conspired to make health care insurance too expensive for thousands of Minnesotans. People we know are going to lose their right to health care. So on a cold Thursday morning, 20 Isaiah clergy – most of us Lutherans – stood outside in a parking lot in the below zero windchill for a press conference to tell the world how cold it is for insurance companies like Medica to “lowball” health insurance rates to remove the competition, then opt out of covering the vulnerable insured when their insurance premiums get too high. I saw the luxurious office buildings in Hopkins off Carlson Parkway where Medica has its headquarters - all the insurance companies have beautiful buildings to consolidate their financial empires – and it offended me. We will speak, and we will name names, because someone has to speak truth here, and be a witness! Health insurance greed, and not government failure, is the real villain taking away health care from human beings. This is the light of truth in today’s darkness – and we have to shine that light. Like in the old fable where a child spoke up to say “*The Emperor has no clothes!*” Sometimes people of childlike faith have to speak up and tell the truth, about corporate greed, and the suffering it inflicts upon vulnerable people: poor people, old people, widows, children and immigrants. Shame on the health insurance industry and its executives, and all those who are getting rich off the sufferings of the poor! Let’s shine our light on health care!

So in the tradition of Moses and the prophets, the early Christians who suffered for their witness, in the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr, this is the voice that we can bring, as people of faith – from Christian, as well as Jew, Muslim, Native American and other faiths. This is the message that must not be dismissed – and a voice that **MUST BE HEARD** today! Whether we have to stand outside in below zero wind chills to proclaim this message, or do it in football stadiums or on the streets, in churches, auditoriums or in the halls of our state and nation’s capitols, we must use our voices to speak God’s word of *justice, welcome, forgiveness, reconciliation and compassionate love for all people in this world.*

So what are you looking for? Jesus says “come and see” the works of the Lord, and hear God’s word being spoken. It might not be “in church” where you hear and see it – but it could be! So keep your eyes and ears open, and do not be afraid to care, to act, or to speak - in the name of Jesus. Amen.