

## Walking With the Back of God's Head in View

First UMC of Pocatello

February 20, 2022

John 1:35-42

\*\*\*

If I were to ask you to close your eyes and imagine Jesus calling his first disciples, chances are that you would picture shallow wooden boats rocking on the sea, men on the beach huddled over piles of netting, the smell of fish and salt, the sounds of expectant birds and ropes pulling taut. And onto that seaside stage a man would walk and cry out to some of the others, "Follow me!" and they would immediately, dramatically, leave everything – and everyone – to follow him. This, of course, is the picture painted by the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

But in the Forth Gospel, the Gospel of John, we get a different story of call. Instead of the Galilean Sea there is the wilderness river, the site of John the Baptist's ministry. One day, two disciples of John the Baptist are standing around with their teacher when Jesus walks by. John the Baptist points and declares, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" See how different this is already? John cries out, not Jesus. John says who *he* sees. It is in response to a testimony rather than a command that the first two disciples exchange masters, leaving the Baptist to pursue the Lamb.

The two, one of whom is Andrew, walk along, and eventually Jesus stops, turns around, and addresses them. "What are you looking for?" he asks. On the surface, the answer is obvious: "The Lamb of God." But even we who know Jesus only need to ask ourselves this question – "What *am* I looking for?" – to realize that it is an open question, not so easily answered, designed to stir up the deep things of the heart.

Faced with such a tremendous and personal question, the disciples respond with a question of their own: "Where are you staying?" which might also be translated, "Where do you dwell?" Again, at first glance, the reason seems obvious. The day is getting on, and there's no way to engage in a conversation of such depth out on the road. But look deeper: the disciples answer Jesus' question

about purpose with a question about presence. They can only get an answer to his by first going and being with him. This dialogue, composed not of declarations and commands but of questions and invitations, ends with those enchanting words of Jesus: “Come and see.”

Reflecting on this scene, one biblical scholar, Mary Coloe, has written: “Discipleship in the Fourth Gospel appears to be simply being and remaining (*menein*) with Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> Disciples put one foot in front of the other, ask questions, want to be where Jesus is. What unfolds is a journey that slowly brings them home to themselves – “What are you looking for?” – by first leading them home to God – “Where are you staying?”

Last Sunday, we learned that Jesus does signs in the presence of his disciples. They glimpse his glory; they believe. Anyone who wants a sign, who wants to find out what they’re looking for, might reasonably ask: *How do I become a disciple?*

Go and see.

*Go and see.* Get moving. Get on the road. Let’s stop standing around with John the Baptist and get on after Jesus!<sup>2</sup> We can’t know him unless we are first with him. The point *is* the going. We can’t see unless we go. But in going, sight!

That’s really important, so let me say it again:

*We can’t see unless we go. But in going, sight.*

That’s a *tough* word for our skeptical age. We like to verify the truth of a thing from the outside before assenting to it, championing it, trusting it – don’t we? I know I do. It is a constant challenge for me to get out from behind the “safety” of my desk. If you’ve been in my office, you’ve seen my bookshelves. John means to tell me that the answer’s not in there somewhere! That sets me on edge.

Then I remember that the call of Christ is always offensive to the established habits of the world. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, his call cuts cleanly through our

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary L. Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 39.

<sup>2</sup> I’m borrowing an insight from Willard M. Swartley, *John* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2013), 78.

*attachments* – to nets, to fathers. In John, his call makes subtler incisions through the nearly invisible webs tangling up our minds and restraining our heart's desires.

In those first three Gospels, Jesus calls us to *repentance*, the turning of our attention and loyalty back to God. But John shows us a Jesus who *turns toward us* and haunts us with that question: “What are you looking for? The prophetic and the mystical, both painful, both beautiful, both held together inseparably by our Scriptures.

I have a mentor who likes to remind me that spiritual maturity doesn't require us to toss out the mind in order to embrace the heart, but instead to draw the mind down into the heart and place its powers in the service of going and seeing. It is thrilling, it feels *real*, when in myriad ways I'm able to live inside Jesus' question, “What are you looking for?” by living out of my own, “Where are you staying?”

Working out that longing for purpose while seeking his presence.

That makes it all sound so lovely, especially if you're already deep in these waters and have a sense for how to swim. But what if you're just on the edge, dipping a toe in, terrified to take the plunge?

Here's something I found myself wondering this week. Look back at verses 37 and 38: “The two disciples...followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, *What are you looking for?*”

I wonder: What kind of mileage lies between verses 37 and 38, between the following and the turning? Could the time be measured in minutes, in hours? How long, how far, did those two disciples have to walk seeing only the back of God's head?

Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like you've been plodding along, and it's *been a while now*, and the sun's getting kind of low in the sky, and you're starting to ask yourself and maybe the person next to you, “Does he know I'm back here? Am I bothering him? I *think* this is the one I'm looking for, but what if I'm wrong? Whoever he is, it'd be nice if he turned around to say Hello!”

And then it dawned on me. *It's been a while now.*

By the time Jesus stops, turns, asks his question, we have *already started*. Our journey is *already* underway. We round a corner to where he finally stands waiting for us, and, in stopping, we realize that we have already come into a strange new landscape. Looking back and craning our necks, we can just make out where we started from down by the river.

Then his question comes: “What are you looking for?” It’s not a question about getting started but about whether we will keep on or go back.

Such is the mysterious grace of God. By the time we are ready to listen to our hearts the Holy Spirit is already at work in us. By the time we confess that we don’t really know where Jesus is staying but we’d desperately like to know, we’re already unstuck.

Many steps lie behind us.

So now, if I were to ask you to close your eyes and imagine the call of the disciples as told by John, and to then lay it over your own story, what would you see? The good news is that no matter where you appear in this landscape, you’ve already come this far, and Jesus is bound to walk by, to walk on, to turn, to beckon.

So why not follow him a little farther?

Why not go and see?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.