

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

Preached by the Rev. Dr. Barbara E. Davis

Sunday, January 19, 2020 (MLK Weekend)

Psalm 40:1-11

John 1:29-42

Many of the most powerful stories in our faith tradition focus around a call to follow God. Samuel, asleep in the Temple, roused by God's voice; Isaiah, surrounded by cherubim and seraphim in the Holy of Holies, Moses in front of the burning bush, sandals removed. Mary, her heart racing in front of Gabriel saying, "Here I am, a servant of the Lord." Disciples that we are, though, we can't help but gravitate to simplest of these call narratives which tell us how Jesus came to be surrounded by a small group of followers at the beginning of his ministry. It is their story that pulls on us. Their ordinariness parallels our ordinariness, and so we imagine ourselves in their shoes. Maybe you remember when you first felt called to join the church, or maybe you remember your confirmation, or maybe you remember what it felt like as a child to consider yourself a disciple, connected to something bigger than yourself, a part of your identity you have never been without.

This passage from the community of John's Gospel gives us a very different kind of call of the disciples. There is no Sea of Galilee here. No Jesus standing on the windy shoreline, pulling fisherman away from their work and families, asking them to be "fishers of men."

As John's community tells it, Jesus does not even call these disciples, instead he is pointed out to them by John the Baptist and curious, they follow him. Interestingly, these are people who know about discerning such ministry. Unlike the story of the fishermen along the Sea of Galilee, these are followers of John the Baptist already. Yet John's words make them curious. Jesus doesn't invite them or even say a word to them, they just follow him. When Jesus does turn and encounter them, he pauses and asks them this question, "what are you looking for?"

In true Biblical fashion, they don't answer this question. Instead, they ask him where he is staying. They go back with him and stay with him all day. One of those men who went with him was Andrew, the brother of Peter. Andrew goes and tells his brother, "we have found the Messiah." It is fair to say Andrew was looking for the Messiah, but what did he hear in Jesus' question, "what are you looking for?" that convinced him this was the one? How did Andrew keep his heart awake to this possibility?

"What are you looking for?" can be a very difficult one to answer. If I asked each of you today, what would you say? What are you looking for? We are often comforted by words from scripture like "ask and you will receive, knock and the door will be open for you" but the problem is that we don't always know what to ask for or what door to knock on.

With all that is going on in the world today, there are some solid ways to answer this question without laboring over our decision too much. Yet, this kind of question is, at its heart, it is a big life-meaning question, not a question whose answer should blow in the winds of chaos. What are

you looking for? Is a question that should anchor us, that should help us when the winds of chaos blow up upon us. So, what are you looking for?

Over the past week or so, I've been reading many of Martin Luther King's speeches. One of my new favorites was a speech he gave in March of 1968 at the National Cathedral in Washington DC. The sermon was titled, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution."

In it, King uses an example from Washington Irving's story Rip Van Winkle. Yes, you heard me right. Now, I remember the story of Rip Van Winkle from a cartoon I saw as a child, and it always kind of scared me. But King puts a very different spin on this story. Let me share with you his words:

I am sure that most of you have read that arresting little story from the pen of Washington Irving entitled "Rip Van Winkle." The one thing that we usually remember about the story is that Rip Van Winkle slept twenty years. But there is another point in that little story that is almost completely overlooked. It was the sign in the end, from which Rip went up in the mountain for his long sleep.

When Rip Van Winkle went up into the mountain, the sign had a picture of King George the Third of England. When later the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington—and looking at the picture he was amazed—he was completely lost. He knew not who he was.

And this reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that Rip slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountain a revolution was taking place that at points would change the course of history—and Rip knew nothing about it. He was asleep. Yes, he slept through a revolution.ⁱ

I honestly don't think I ever thought of Rip Van Winkle this way, as sleeping through a revolution, which he most certainly does. King's framing of Rip this way sheds a brand-new light on an old story. He ends that paragraph I read earlier by saying, "And one of the great many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution."ⁱⁱⁱ

Hearing King's cautionary interpretation of Rip Van Winkle, gives us an opportunity to hear again Jesus' question, "what are you looking for?" That question, said in Jesus' time, said today, is a question meant to prompt articulation of new attitudes, new mental responses. "What are you looking for?" is not a question you can answer while you're asleep.

You may be familiar with Orion magazine, which tackles ecological issues often with a spiritual slant. The December issue of this past year featured a piece titled, "United in Change" by the journalist Meera Subramanian.ⁱⁱⁱ In this article, she summarizes her trips across the country, "falling in love with strangers" as she puts it. Her work in falling in love was to seek connections with people she encountered, especially "*what they care about and what they believe in. Who they vote for and why. What they remember from before and what they expect in the future,*

which to their collective grief are often different things.”^{iv} She admits she intentionally picked so-called red states to hear these stories and find these lost Americans. She says she was looking for love but also just simple civility. She found peach farmers in Georgia and ranchers in the Dakotas, she met people in Oregon and Montana. After she shares these love stories, Subramanian concludes that what is happening across these lines of politics is a true sense of loss around the land.

This project resonated with me in a way that, at first, I had trouble articulating. Many of you know that I grew up in western Pennsylvania, in the rust belt, just about an hour south of Lake Erie, right near the Ohio state line. My grandfather, my father, my mother all worked in the steel mills in and around Youngstown before the industry collapsed. I grew up riding in the car back and forth across the Pennsylvania/Ohio state line, watching the empty steel mills rust in their place, paralleling the deterioration of farms along the landscape. When I moved to New York in my twenties, I was fascinated and busy reshaping my idea of home to include the urban landscape of New York. That decade and the next one for me became years when I felt that familiar saying from that old Thomas Wolf book, “You can’t go home again.”

But a funny thing happened a few years ago, I started looking for a way, *not* to go home again but to bring home here in my life in lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. I started claiming my rust belt roots and thinking about the decades that I lived there as much more formative, much more important than I had previously thought. In part, I wanted to think about how to bring the diversity of what I knew of that *place* into my experience here. I wanted to tell stories about that place and the people there, of what it means to live in that kind of economic diversity, to honestly talk about issues of the working class and not just paint them red, I want to tell and hear stories of that kind of social and political diversity, and that kind of diversity period. What I was looking for was a way to not have to give up one part of myself to keep another.

Part of what I think has so many of us so torn up these days is how divided and uncivil our world is. The momentum toward those forms of chaos is disturbing. What we are looking for is better ways to have conversations, better behavior from leadership, no matter what their political allegiance. But what we also lack is language to help us name the pain that we are feeling without unity and civility. We know it makes us angry, but it also makes us feel lost and disconnected.

Subramanian pointed to this idea as one that she felt all across her interviews around the United States, that people were feeling lost. She quotes “*the Australian eco-philosopher Glenn Albrecht, [who] coined the term “solastalgia” to mean a “pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory.*”^v She also referred to other phrases that emerged in Dutch, in Welsh, in Portuguese that capture this same ache, this same loss. Perhaps what we are looking for is a way to feel connected to our land and landscapes again, to feel some pride in connecting to the spaces where we live.

She ends her pondering by reflecting on another word. Here is how she describes it: *But more and more I am reminded of an older word: bodhicitta, Sanskrit for “awakened heart.” It is that moment when you are overwhelmed by a great compassion for all around you, and you finally let go of the attachment to yourself as a thing in isolation, something separate. The recognition of*

the web that holds us together, that prevents functional extinction, that, in today's America, could keep democracy alive.^{vi}

As I read and re-read those words, I began to wonder if that was what those first disciples of Jesus in the story were recognizing. An awakened heart. They knew what they were looking for because Jesus, just by asking, “what are you looking for?” helped them feel less isolated and more connected to the land and the people around them. Those disciples were not Rip Van Winkle, sleeping through the revolution. Something in Jesus awakened their hearts: John’s describing him as the lamb of God, his walk, his talk, his question, “what are you looking for?” connected them. They were united in wanting change.

Our faith has that same potential to awaken our hearts, if we can let it. Our faith gives us language to name our pain and together, to move in that pain. Our discipleship can open up ideas and qualities for us that lead us to a new hope in our connectedness. Our discipleship shows us a way out of isolation by challenging us to name what we are looking for.

I don’t believe there is one simple answer for that question. I believe we all have different responses and different calls, but I do believe there are some core ideas we can seek out – love, civility – things that bring us together. And in this time, nothing could be more important than at least being awake. But it is King’s words that remind us, not only do we need to stay awake during this period of change that we are living through, we must develop new attitudes, new responses. An awakened heart is a learning heart, and we must allow ours to be more inclusive, more compassionate. And each day we must wake up and respond to that same call our ancestors in faith did all those years ago, “what are you looking for?”

ⁱ King, Jr., Martin Luther. 1968. “Remaining Awake Through A Great Revolution.” Delivered on March 31, 1968 at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Subramanian, Meera. 2019 (Winter). “United in Change,” in *Orion*.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.