

What Are You Looking For?

Once upon a time, there was a woman named Sarah. Now when you hear those words, *once upon a time*, you can be pretty sure that the narrative that follows is going to be fictional. And this one is no exception. It's actually a short story. And Sarah, the main character in this short story, is an unmarried woman. An attractive, articulate, educated, professional single woman who registers with an online dating service for the purpose of meeting a man of similar background, tastes, and worldview. The thing is, Sarah isn't interested in beginning a relationship with just *anyone*. She's a bit more discriminating than that.

Well. Among the men who respond to her post is a fellow by the name of Nick. He texts her. Before too long, they're having a phone conversation. And as they chat, Sarah begins to wonder what it really is that Nick wants in a relationship. So she asks him a question. Sarah says, "So tell me, Nick: What are you looking for?"

What are you looking for? It's a significant question. It's the same question we hear in this Sunday's reading from chapter one of John's Gospel. One of the first things you notice about John's Gospel is that it doesn't start out the way some of the other gospels do. During the Christmas season, we read Luke's and Matthew's nativity stories, in which the One born in Bethlehem is a baby. A young child.

But the Fourth Gospel begins differently. John the Baptist appears, pointing to, witnessing to, revealing the incarnate One. Who first appears in this Gospel as an adult. Walking along, he hears behind him the footfalls of two of John's disciples. And so he turns around. And asks: *What are you looking for?* In the Fourth Gospel, these are the very first words on the lips of Jesus.

Now, when you meet someone, aren't their *words* one of the first things you notice about them? First words carry import. We pay attention to a person's first words. And we pay particularly close attention when those words are the words of Jesus.

What are you looking for? Today's reading provides several possible answers to this question. In this text, Jesus is given a number of different identities.

For John, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the pre-existent One. Jesus is the Spirit-bearer and Spirit-baptizer. And Jesus is the Son of God.

For Andrew, one of Jesus' first followers, Jesus is the Teacher. And Jesus is the Messiah, which means the Anointed One.

I wonder. What if we could know Jesus in only *one* of these ways? How would we see him?

What if we look for Jesus only as the Lamb of God? In the Jerusalem of John's day, lambs are sacrificial animals. Lambs are led to slaughter and then laid on the altar as an offering. Picturing Jesus as the Lamb of God evokes reflection on his sacrifice. On his self-offering. On his being laid on a cross to suffer and die for the sin of a broken world.

But let's set that image aside for a moment. What if we look for Jesus only as the pre-existent One? In the Gospel prologue, this is the One who is in the beginning with God.

This is the One who *is* God! This is the One through whom all things come into being. Could this One who is fully divine possibly be fully human as well?

What if we look for Jesus only as a traveling rabbi, as a great and wise Teacher of ethics, yet still just a man? A man who gets tired and hungry and thirsty like you and I do. Could this One who is fully human possibly be fully divine as well?

In the two thousand year history of the Christian church, there've been those who contended that Jesus was God but not man. There've been many who insisted—and some still do—that Jesus was man but not God.

Jesus died for your sins and mine. This truth is central to our faith. But if we focus *only* on the atoning, sacrificial, redemptive *death* of Jesus, do we not miss all the power of preaching and parable, all the miraculous signs and wonders, all the amazing healings and raisings, all the deep compassion and unfailing mercy of Jesus' grace-filled *life*?

Being finite human creatures, don't we have a tendency to try to define Jesus according to our own conception of who he actually is? Aren't we inclined to attempt to label and restrict

and confine him so that he'll fit neatly within our limited human understanding? When we look at him, isn't our perspective sometimes too narrow? Aren't we a bit like the blind men who each touch different *parts* of an elephant and thus are unable to agree on what the elephant is really like?

Maybe part of the reason Jesus asks *what are you looking for?* is that he knows that sometimes we look only for the Jesus we *want* him to be. So maybe we need to ask ourselves some difficult questions. Maybe we need to search our hearts. Are we looking for One who will solve our problems? One who will chase away our troubles? One who will guarantee us prosperity? One who will ensure our happiness?

Or are we looking for Jesus Christ as he really is? This One of many names eludes our efforts to do otherwise. And even our earnest strivings to conceive of all that he is and does. At the very end of the Gospel, the Fourth Evangelist muses that if all the things Jesus did were written down, they would fill more books than the whole world could contain.

You and I could live out a hundred lifetimes and never know the Christ completely. There's always more of his

fullness, more of his richness in store. This season after the Epiphany is one of revelation. A season of light shining on and in and through him. A season when you and I are drawn more closely into him. Into the Christ.

Who is mystery. Yet of one thing about him you can be sure, during this Epiphany time and always. This One you're looking for is One who knows you. One who's known you since you were in your mother's womb. One who looks at you and knows everything about you. Just as Jesus looks at Andrew's brother, Simon Peter, and knows *him*. Jesus knows Peter's weaknesses. His impetuosity. His penchant for saying the wrong thing. And his fears. Peter's fears that, one dark night, would cause him even to deny his Lord. Jesus knows *your* weaknesses, as well. And mine.

But that's not all. Jesus also knows about strengths. He looks at Peter and sees the rock-solid character of Peter on which the church will be built. He sees the underlying resolve, the steadfastness that will enable Peter to go and boldly proclaim all that he's seen and heard. Jesus sees Simon Peter. Sees what he's made of.

And sees his servant Martin, too. On this the anniversary of Martin's birth, and tomorrow, people across this nation and beyond honor the memory of a man whose life was in Christ. Martin understood himself to be—first and foremost—a minister of Jesus Christ. Martin was listening when Jesus asked *what are you looking for?* Martin looked to create a loving community that includes all people. He dreamed of a community characterized by non-violence, justice, and peace. A community shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ who looks at *you*, too. And sees you. He sees that you're here today. Because sometime, someone told you: *We have found the Messiah, the Christ.* Who sees that you're here today because, just as Andrew brought his brother to Jesus, sometime, someone brought *you*. We give thanks for those times. And we give thanks for those people.

For it's because of them that you first heard Jesus ask, *what are you looking for?* Christ is still asking this question, still asking it today.

Could it be that you're looking for Someone who invites you to *come and see?*

Could it be that you're looking for Someone who invites you into relationship?

Could it be that you're looking for Someone who invites you into growing in the knowledge of who he truly is and in the ways of his reign?

Could it be that you're looking for Someone who invites you to open yourself to the meaning and purpose and direction that only he can give your life?

Could it be that you're looking for Someone who invites you to stay with him and have an everlasting home with him and in him?

Could it be that this is the One you've been looking for all your life—maybe even before you *knew* you were looking? Maybe today you're *still* looking. Looking for a deeper intimacy with this One who is your destination: This God, your God who loves you unconditionally and immeasurably. This God you've found to be perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ.

Who knows every gift that you've been given. Who knows that you have it within you to answer his call. To be his

disciple. To be a useful servant of his kingdom. To be a faithful witness. To share the good news with those who have never heard it. To encourage them to *come and see* for themselves. To be a light to the nations, so that God's salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

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