

Come and See

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John 1:29-42

Faith is, I believe, as much about questions as it is about answers, answers that are explored in relationship and in community. Here are two big, audacious questions.

The first is from the late poet Mary Oliver, and her poem called "A Summer's Day."

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

The second big, audacious question is from a rock band, not Radiohead, but U2, from what singer Bono calls a gospel song for a restless spirit.

"I have climbed highest mountain
I have run through the fields
Only to be with you
I have run; I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls
Only to be with you
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for..."

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

What are you looking for?

It's possible that U2 knew they were quoting Jesus, but let's connect the dots anyway. Our passage from John's gospel begins with John the Baptist testifying to who Jesus is, the Lamb of God, foreshadowing all that is to come. He then speaks of baptism – remember that – remember that Jesus' first credential is his baptism, just as we are to remember that the only credential that matters for us is our baptism. John testifies regarding Jesus. The next day he sees Jesus and calls him out – the Lamb of God. Two of John's disciples take note, and they follow Jesus. He turns to them. It is a most extraordinary interchange. Jesus turns to them and says, "What are you looking for?" Usually, in our house, when that question is asked the answer is something like "my keys" or "my wallet" or "the tickets to the game."

What are you looking for? This is a more profound question, calling for a more profound answer. Even so, the disciples are our stand-ins, and they don't get it right away. "Where are you staying?" they ask him in response. And Jesus, who rarely, rarely, answers a question directly – a practice at once liberating and exasperating – Jesus simply says, "Come and see." Come and see. And they do. They spend the afternoon with him, exploring, we suppose, those twin questions of what you will do with your life and what are you looking for.

Imagine all that was going on in those followers' hearts and minds and spirits. They had made a choice – follow John. We don't know all that that meant, what it meant in terms of their work, their relationships, even their beliefs. But John, the one whom they followed, the one to whom they had professed loyalty, directed their faith not to himself – an easy enough thing for a religious leader to do then and now – but to another. John knew. He knew. He knew how compelling this Jesus was, and would be. He knew that in their searching they would find in this Jesus what they were looking for, the Messiah, God's anointed one. Next week we will explore the consequences of this discovery – be sure to come back – but for now, we can only imagine the impact of that afternoon conversation. Andrew tells his brother Simon all about it, and Jesus has the audacity to rename Simon on the spot. You will be Peter.

COVID world has led us into deeper consideration of some of this, in our own lives and in the culture. What will you do with your life; what are you looking for. "The Great Resignation," it's been called, whereby people simply quit their jobs, jobs that no longer gave them meaning. Others, at the same time, didn't have that choice; they had their jobs taken from them, eliminated, or furloughed. We don't always do a good job of sorting this out, this intersection of concepts like vocation and career and job and calling. Too often, our work becomes our identity. Too often, our vocation becomes who we are. For some of us, the gifts we have been given can be used in our work, but even then we must be careful, mindful. For others of us, our work is the vehicle to allow us to do something else, the thing we are called to do.

My grandfather was first a coal miner in western Maryland, dangerous work. He hopped a train to Akron to work in the tire factories. His work was important to him. It had meaning, and it provided well for his family. Yet it wasn't the entirety of his one wild and precious life. He was a husband and father, an uncle and later a grandfather. He was a soldier in World War I. He was a baseball fan, a neighbor, a friend. He was a Presbyterian elder.

This is the weekend where every white preacher becomes an expert on Martin Luther King, Jr., and seeks to make some hopefully more than adequate extrapolation from King's life to this moment.

In December 1956 King gave a speech in Montgomery, anticipating the eventual success of the civil rights movement beyond the Montgomery bus boycott. "Whatever your life's work is," King said, "do it well. Even if it does not fall in the category of one of the so-called big professions, do it well...If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the host of Heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well.'"

I believe that, yet I also believe we are called to work, in the spirit of Matthew 25, to make every job well-paying, and dignified. That's one COVID lesson, a lesson that got King killed as he led protests in Memphis for better wages and conditions for sanitation workers.

What will you do with your life; what are you looking for. King originally was set on being a doctor or a lawyer. Then after graduation from seminary just a few miles from here in Chester, he set out to be an academic. In a profound sense, Jesus said to him "come and see."

We are still early enough in the new year that our resolutions haven't been totally blown out of the water. But rather than resolutions – lose weight, less social media time, daily meditation – perhaps we think about it differently. Perhaps we arise each day and ask Mary Oliver's question. Perhaps we join with U2 in the journey. Perhaps – as we are making ziti in a few moments or spreading PB and J or sorting canned goods, we ask the big questions, and trust the one who says "come and see" to lead us into transformation.

Jesus doesn't test us, or interrogate us, or evaluate us. He invites us. He understands already that we are on a journey, and in the deepest parts of our souls, that we have gifts to share, and seek to make a difference. King understood that, not as his own discovery, but as a reflection of his deep faith, his own response to the "come and see" invitation. He said

““Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

A soul generated by love. That's our life. That's what we are looking for. “Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? Will you go where you don't know and never be the same? Will you let my love be shown; will you let my name be known; will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?” Amen.