

We Have Found the Messiah!

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
Preached at Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
On the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany, (16Jan), 2011.

Text: John 1:41

“We have found the Messiah.” ~St. Andrew

In that first chapter of John, after all the poetry of the prologue, is the beginning of the church. John the Baptist witnessed to two of his own disciples that Jesus is the Lamb of God and from his witness, the two decided to follow Jesus. *Follow* is a loaded word in this fourth Gospel. It means you become a disciple, you accept the priorities of Jesus, and you follow him wherever he leads you. Bishop Newbigin explained:

Here we are introduced to one of the fundamental words of Christianity. We shall see how this word, which—to begin with—seems to mean only a simple movement, is shown to have more and more profound levels of meaning until at the end Peter—who has been told ‘You cannot follow me now’—comes to learn what ‘following’ really means and receives the definite summons ‘Follow me’ (21:19)... One could, in fact, describe the whole book as an exposition of what it will mean to ‘follow Jesus.’¹

Jesus’ first question to his new followers is “*What are you looking for?*”² It is the question to which each of us must find an answer at some point, even if we don’t know how to frame the question or if no one like Jesus asks us. All our wandering, drifting and exploring, at some point we have to answer this big question: What do we want and what are we seeking?³

But what if we don’t know what or whom we seek? What if we aren’t even aware that we are drifting from thing to thing? What if we don’t even know our vague longing for meaning, purpose and direction actually has an answer? Again Newbigen, “How can we know what we seek until we have found it? Only if God has so made us that we have the sense of it and the longing for it before we have the possession of it. Only if, in truth, ‘all things were made through him’ so that when he comes to us—even if we do not know him—he is coming to his own.”⁴ What this means is that there is a God-shaped hole in each of us. We may try a lot of things before we find God to fill it, but we are created with that need, that desire, that search built into us by the God we seek.

Or is it the God who seeks us? I have often puzzled over Jesus’ comment to his followers later in the Gospel of John: “*You did not choose me, but I chose you.*”⁵ We live in a time when we think everything depends upon our own decisions and choices. Parents go out of their way to

¹Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Light Has Come*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982), p. 19.

²John 1:38.

³Newbigin, *op cit.*

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵John 15:16.

make sure children make up their own little minds.⁶ To make your own choices is seen to be the highest good. What did Jesus mean, “You did not choose me, but I chose you”? Does it mean there is nothing we do and everything hinges on God’s actions? No, we are not passive and unable to do anything about our predicament and search. Here is first question for our part of the equation: *What are you looking for?* “At some point everyone has to answer it.”⁷

In the new autobiography of the former President is an interesting account of how he became a Christian. Long before he bought the Texas Rangers or became Governor of Texas, George W. Bush was vaguely religious but had not yet found an answer to the question, “*What are you looking for?*” He had joined a men’s Bible study at a Presbyterian Church. But by his own admission, he was still living it up, a son of privilege and not settled. He had had every advantage but was mostly drifting not sure what to do with himself and his life. One summer while his father was Vice President, up in Kennebunkport, Dr. Billy Graham came to visit the family. There was conversation around the dinner table one night, including some talk about religion. The next day the preacher asked son George to go for a walk. Graham asked about his life in Texas. Bush told him about his twin girls and, among other things, shared his thought that reading the Bible could make him a better person. Gently, the elder preacher, said,

There’s nothing wrong with using the Bible as a guide to self-improvement.... Jesus’ life provides a powerful example for our own. But self-improvement is not really the point of the Bible. The center of Christianity is not the self. It is Christ.⁸

One wonders how Dr. Graham knew that *W* was adrift. Perhaps Barbara or Laura Bush asked him to have a talk with their son and husband. But if you are quiet and listen, you find out all sorts of things when people talk to you. He must have sensed this young man with so much promise was searching for something but had yet to look in the right place. So many people over the ages have tried to distil God out of religion and approach the Bible as a moral guide to better behavior. Graham was right, however, the center of the Bible is Christ and the primary focus is on our following Jesus, not tweaking conduct to make us nicer people.

What does this mean: the center is Christ and not the self? Certainly more moral behavior results if one truly follows Jesus, but it is only a half-truth if you think the purpose of Christianity and the Bible is to make us better. It is like saying the purpose of baseball is to hit round balls with fat sticks. The real point of the game is to get people to home plate (or to keep them from getting to home plate). In the process of getting there you have to hit the ball and run but that is not the whole point, is it? As Graham said the center of Christianity is not the self—even for self-improvement—but rather Christ. There is something more to faith than becoming a better person. It is primarily about following Jesus.

The decision to follow Jesus and be his disciple is bigger than the self. God has much to do with the call. Remember, “I chose you, you did not choose me.” It has something to do with finding what goes into that God-shaped hole in each of us. The first question is ours to answer,

⁶This in part explains the stunned reaction to Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010).

⁷Newbigin, *op cit*.

⁸Bush, George W. *Decision Points*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 31.

What are you looking for? There is a difference between saying I'm looking for God and I'm looking for a thinner waist line or more money or a community to be part of. The call of discipleship is to follow Jesus. To follow someone implies you take directions from the one you follow. Where you go may not even be known but the assumption is God knows best where you will go, if you follow Jesus.

Now, let's go back to the text. After Jesus asked the two would-be followers what they were looking for, they replied in a very odd way. Instead of saying *meaning* or *community* or a *better life* or even *God* they asked Jesus another question. "*Rabbi, where are you staying?*"⁹ The word in the Greek text of the Gospel here translated 'staying' is an equally loaded word in John. You notice that when they followed Jesus and went to where he was staying, remaining with him, within twenty-four hours Andrew became a witness in his own right. He went to his brother Simon and invited him to join them. "We have found the Messiah!" he told him. Then in a very simple sentence, we read, "He brought Simon to Jesus."¹⁰ The business of 'staying' with Jesus means more than finding out his address. The assumption of the Gospel is that when you find out where Jesus is and spend time with him there, you find the answer to your life's quest.¹¹ You find what exactly fits into that God-shaped hole in your soul. You find faith, direction, purpose. Yes, you may also find self-improvement and a few other things as by-products of your quest, but you especially find Jesus.

It is worth noting that the secret to both Jesus' invitation to the two and then Andrew's invitation to Simon is very simple, not even theological. It is just, "come and see."¹² Where would we bring folks to see Jesus today? You might begin by asking yourself where you find Jesus? Is he not here in our congregation and here seekers may find him? That is why I began by telling you in this sermon that the church began in the Gospel of John in the first chapter, in that act of inviting a few people to follow Jesus. It is, too, where our church begins on our road to renewal.

End

We Have Found the Messiah. DOC

⁹John 1:38.

¹⁰John 1:42.

¹¹Newbiggin, *op cit.*, 19-20. "The goal of all human seeking is that place where Jesus *abides* in the Father and the disciples *abide* in him." (See especially John 14 and 15).

¹²John 1:39.