

January 19, 2014 / Second Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

What Are You Looking For?

Isaiah 49:1-7

The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb God named me.

John 1:29-34

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?"

What Are You Looking For?

Something we just heard from John's gospel pertains to what we are about as a faith community.

John is with two of his disciples when Jesus walks by. He had baptized Jesus a couple of days before. Now John enthusiastically points him out to his disciples: "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" He's the one I've been telling you about, the one for whom my life and work have been a preparation! The two disciples leave John and start following Jesus, which does not yet mean discipleship to the way Jesus teaches and embodies. They are curious to check out this new spiritual teacher. They have not yet committed to discipleship.

Jesus stops, turns around, and asks them perhaps the most important question of all: "What are you looking for?" Jesus' question is not chit-chat. In John's gospel, Jesus is always speaking from what seems to be another dimension. People don't quite get what he is talking about, for they are thinking and speaking on the more superficial levels. Jesus means business. His concern is with our living out of life's sacred dimension. "Being born from above" is one way he puts it in John's gospel. The two men are caught short, so their response is a bit inane. "Uh, where are you staying?" Jesus accepts them where they are and invites them to come and see. They stay all day, and end up as disciples. They move from curiosity to commitment.

What are you looking for? What am I looking for? This is really the question that lives at the center of our community. We ask it, in one form or another, of ourselves and others. It is the question of our deepest heart or longing or desire, our deepest sense of our life and how we live it. Mostly we have been living out of what others tell us we should be or do--society, church, family. It is not often that someone asks us, What do YOU think? What is most important to YOU? To what do you want to give YOUR life? Deciding to work with that question

means taking responsibility for our own lives, and then working work patiently from one level of living to another. We start to live from the inside out rather than the outside in, out of our connection with God. Gently and attentively we unravel the tangled knot of our inner life until we begin to touch and free up that bright thread of our authentic, God-created self. This journey, once begun, becomes our life.

When people come to explore being part of this community, we don't put them on committees, or tell them what to think or believe, or try to sweep them up in enthusiasm. We invite others, if they wish, to join us in working with Jesus' question, "What are you looking for?" Through the simple disciplines or practices with which we work, we open to that core of our lives where we are connected to God and where we touch our truest self. It is there we begin to see and accept who God made us uniquely to be, and what we are given to offer to the world in the service of life. When we are working with the question of what we are really looking for, we touch life in its fullest, deepest, most real dimension. We come more and more alive instead of simply existing or muddling through. No one can do it for us, and yet we do it together in community. We encourage one another as we each work as faithfully as we can with our commitments and share our discoveries, struggles, and joys along the way.

Born to Serve

Our reading from Isaiah gives a glimpse into the experience of this journey. It is the second of four so-called "servant songs"[42:1-4; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12]. In the text, the servant is most likely Israel as a people. The servant is also each of us and us together as we follow the of the servant Jesus.

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples far away!

The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb God named me.

The servant is aware that her life is related to the wider world, the coastlands, or literally(Hebrew), "the islands of the seas". All people and places, not just one's own. The servant's life is universally connected. Our lives and how we live them are woven into the whole fabric of life. How we live touches the life of the world. The life of the whole world, human and otherwise, touches and shapes us. Living with awareness of this wider belonging opens us more fully to God's deepest purposes working through us.

The servant is aware of belonging to and being called by God even before birth. Call is so deep and central to the servant's life that it can only be described as having been there all the time. It is in our spiritual DNA. Life has purpose and meaning at its core. It is not always

evident or clear, but it is there for us to discover and participate in. When we are paying attention to our lives, which is what the spiritual life is about, we see with growing clarity how our lives are interconnected with everything around us and what we have to contribute to life, our niche, our place.

When we are living out of this sense of call, using the gifts we have, then our lives will touch some need in the world, illuminate some darkness, heal some wound, enhance some beauty or joy. Our inward journey work is the daily touching of this servanthood dimension of our lives. Our spiritual practice is to help us awaken to our true lives, our belonging to God and our being called by God. The being and doing, the inward and the outward, are part of the wholeness of who we really are.

God made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of God's hand God hid me;

God made me a polished arrow, in God's quiver God hid me away.

And God said to me, "You are my servant, [Israel], in whom I will be glorified."

These images amplify the nature of our lives as "called." Words or mouths like sharp swords is a common biblical image for speaking what is true and what is good. It is never a literal sword for hurting or destroying. The sword may be a word that is hard to speak or to hear, or a word of comfort and peace, but always has the purpose of the healing of life. It is about more than talking. It is about how we live.

We are not just arrows, but polished arrows. Each of us can shine, as it were, with the connection of our own unique lives in God and God's purposes for life. Being hidden in God's quiver suggests that it is God who decides how and when to use us, to pull us out and send us into life at some point or other. The purpose of our inward journey work is to become sensitive to when God is pulling us out of the quiver, when God is pointing us toward some need, some opportunity to give what we have to offer, and some word to speak or to live. It is also important to know when we are being put back into the quiver, to simply BE there, at rest.

God is glorified in the servant. We radiate God's glory when we work with all of this business of living as called and gifted persons. We don't "try to" glorify God. God's glory is seen in us as we work and often struggle with what we are really looking for, with our call and the discerning and using of our gifts. When we are living at this level, we glow, as it were, with divine life. A frequent guest in our retreat center commented that those in our community seem to glow, seem spiritually alive. I was impressed by this observation. I know how most of us struggle mightily with the things I've been talking about, and are painfully aware of our insufficiencies and how much we have yet to learn and grow. Our friend wasn't

talking about that, but the aura, if you will, of those who are working with their lives at the deepest, most sacred level.

But I said, 'I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.'

I experience bouts of depression at times, looking back, wondering whether anything I did mattered, had any effect for good, and seeing much I wasted on things that don't really matter. The servant expresses feelings of failure, of having wasted life. We gave ourselves to what we thought God had called us to, but the thing fell apart or had little effect. Or we look at the enormous needs in the world, and then at our tiny lives and efforts, and wonder what is the use. I finally understand that these self-judgments and self-assessments are ego stuff, just like arrogance or over-estimating ourselves. We have been taught to measure ourselves by somebody's idea of success or achievement, and to be scared to death of failure. No wonder we plunge into despair and self-condemnation. Yet, these experiences are opportunities to look deeper, beyond the ego, to the true, larger Self created by God. Our truest nature finds its value and joy in simply being in relationship with God, simply being who and doing what God created us to be and do, leaving the rest to God.

Then the servant remembers: *Yet surely my cause is with God, my reward is with God.* Being rooted in God is enough. Giving our lives into the purposes of God, insofar as we can see them, is enough. Not racking up successes or groaning over perceived failures. There is no failure for one who is living close to God and following the movements of God's spirit in one's life. The only kind of "failure" would be not trying to live our lives as we're made to live them, not working with that question, What are you looking for?. We can let go of success and failure. We can drop the constant, fretful measuring of our lives. I am not talking about a healthy and useful self-examination. I am saying that God takes whatever we have done or not done and weaves it into the big picture. Our inward journey work is to drop the attachments to success and failure, and to awaken to the now, where God meets us, loving us as we are, opening up a new path, a different work perhaps, or a fresh engagement with our ongoing ministry or commitment.

So, here's the servant feeling all busted up and broken and like a failure. So what does God say?

*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

God does not fire or demote the servant, or let the servant sink into self-doubt or self-pity. God gives the servant an even bigger job to do! You are going to be a light to the whole world! Didn't Jesus also say, in the Sermon on the Mount, that we are the light of the world? My salvation, my healing power in you will touch the ends of the earth! Don't waste time and energy pouring over the past, beating up on yourself. Don't fall into the kind of ego-centeredness that thinks everything that goes wrong or does not succeed must be your fault. Open to the next thing that God is doing in and through and around you. Keep listening and following. You may feel like the biggest failure in the history of the world, but quit wasting time feeling sorry for yourself or beating yourself up, or blaming someone or something. That's not where God is. God is already calling you forward into life, into the new thing. It is not about our saving the world or changing the world. It is about God renewing and healing the life of the world through us as we discern and live out of the callings and gifts God has given us, as faithfully as we can.

Living as God's servants. Knowing ourselves as persons called into life, instruments of God's loving and redeeming purposes. Not getting caught in success and failure, or any kind of self-condemnation. Staying in touch with the freedom of being our truest, authentic self. Reminding ourselves daily of the importance of Jesus' question: What are you looking for? That is what we are to be about our whole life long, no matter what stage of life we are in. From before our birth and right up to the mysterious threshold that is our death, God is with us, always calling, always empowering, always doing a new thing in us and through us, and in this way, always shining in and through our lives.