

“What are you looking for?” In John’s Gospel, these are the very first words we hear from Jesus. “What are you looking for?”

Last week, we heard Matthew’s account of the baptism of Jesus. That reading revealed the loving relationship between God and Jesus, and also brought Jesus into communion with all humanity. This week, John’s Gospel gives us John the Baptizer’s second-hand testimony that he saw the baptism and the descent of the dove, and heard the voice from heaven that persuaded him that Jesus was the Christ. John the Baptizer becomes John the Messenger, not performing the baptism, but talking about what he saw with the people in his circle of friends and followers.

This is a pattern that will repeat throughout Christian scripture: behold, communicate and offer. But the Gospel author uses a word that we have watered down. What we heard was John telling people: “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” But, you see, the word that John’s Gospel uses more often than any other book of Christian scripture is better rendered as “behold.” The Baptizer uses a different word to describe seeing the dove descending, but twice in this passage uses the word “behold” to say “Behold, the Lamb of God.”

Sadly, this word has been scrubbed from modern translations of scripture, taking with it one of the most insightful treasures that Christianity has to offer. The distinction is important. To behold is not the same as to look or to observe or to see.

To behold is to open oneself in humility to God’s reality, to loosen our grip on our limited perspective so that God can expand our way of making sense of life. Without erasing our old songs, this is how God puts new songs of praise in our mouths. Through the gesture of beholding, we open ourselves to realizing our shared nature with God. Through the gesture of beholding, we notice the human participation in God’s Divine outpouring upon the world.

“Behold!” John says as Jesus approaches. “Behold!,” he says again to his disciples, “Behold! The Lamb of God” and in so doing, John names what God has revealed to him. Two of John’s disciples follow Jesus and when they do so, Jesus asks them one question: “What are you looking for?” After spending the day with Jesus, Andrew decides to follow John’s pattern: beholding God’s presence in Jesus, he then communicates to his brother, Simon Peter, what he has seen and heard, and invites his brother to come and see for himself.

John the Baptizer, Andrew and then his brother Simon Peter are filled with the reality of God’s peace and joy revealed in Jesus Christ. And then God’s

loving presence radiating from them entices other people. They sing, as the psalmist wrote, a song of praise to God that many shall see, “stand in awe, and put their trust in God.” Behold, communicate, offer. This repeating pattern runs throughout Christian scripture and throughout the more fruitful moments of Christian history. That same pattern bears fruit right here at St. Elizabeth as we continue to grow and deepen.

The pattern stands the test of time because Jesus taught it to us; Jesus, the Word made flesh. The prologue of John’s Gospel claims that what came into being in Jesus Christ was life that was the light of all people. And John’s Jesus provides access to that light not by running people through a battery of qualifications. He doesn’t ask people about their political affiliations, about their private lives or about their behaviors.

Jesus asks one question: “What are you looking for?” That question is all the opening that Jesus needs to enable people to behold the outpouring of God’s glory, love and light. That same question is all we need to open the opportunity for others to behold the face of God. Jesus also left us the only invitation necessary for those who respond to the opportunity: “Come and see.”

Let me tell you a story: Exactly a year ago, I was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. One morning, we were driving with our guides, Gussan and Assam – the desert on one side of us and the Jordan River on the other. “There are two seas in Palestine,” Gussan told us. “One of them is fresh and full of fish. Greenery grows all along the banks, and trees spread their branches over it. All kinds of plants stretch out thirsty roots to sip its life-giving waters.

“The River Jordan creates this sea,” he said, “by pouring sparkling water down from the hills to the north. Along the way, the water laughs in the sunshine and dances past people’s homes and bird’s nests; past orchards and farms where it pauses to grow food and every kind of life is happier because it is there.

“From there,” Gussan went on, “the Jordan flows on out into another sea. Here there are no fish splashing, no leaves fluttering in the breeze, no birds singing, no shepherds tending sheep. Tourists visit, but locals prefer to go around it so there is only one road beside it. The air hangs thick above the water that is so salty – ten times saltier than the ocean – that people, animals and plants cannot drink it.

“Now, what do you think makes the difference between these two seas?” Gussan asked. “It’s not the Jordan River. The river empties the same good water into both. It’s not the hills that they pass through or that lands that surround them. So what makes the difference?”

Gussan let us sit and ponder for a minute. “Look for God’s desire for all of creation and you will find the answer. Here is the difference. The Sea of Galilee receives but does not try to keep the Jordan’s waters for itself. For every drop that flows into it, another drop flows out. The Sea of Galilee delights in giving what it has received, and so it is blessed with abundant life all around it and all through it. This is the sea that Jesus lived beside and where he emptied himself for us.

“The other sea is selfish. The other sea also receives the Jordan’s waters that have passed from the Galilee through the desert to offer life, but the second sea tries to keep every drop that it is given. The second sea imagines that what it has been given is to be held and hoarded. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse, and even what it has been given evaporates into the heat of the desert.

“The Jordan River feeds both seas. The Galilee chooses to share what has been given and so it lives, and life thrives around it. The other sea chooses to hide away what has been given and so life passes it by. We call *it* the Dead Sea.”

Gassan’s story captures the essence of the pattern in our Gospel reading. There is a logic in it that can only be accessed by trust. What God pours into our lives is the light of all people. Beholding that light and then choosing to give it away leads to life in abundance.

Now, in the year that has passed since I heard Gassan’s story, we have seen life flowing into St. Elizabeth. OK, well, we’ve also seen more than our fair share of actual water flowing into the church, but instead of letting that shut us down, we got through it together. Life was and is abundant here.

Despite setbacks and challenges, we gather joyfully in this place to behold the Lamb of God that God continues to pour freely out. We open ourselves in humility to God’s reality, loosening our grip on our useful but limited perspectives so that God can expand our way of making sense of life. We open ourselves to God’s gift of new songs of praise, even as we delight in the old ones. We become increasingly aware of our participation in God’s pouring out of love upon the world like the Jordan pours water into the Palestinian desert.

If we want to continue to nurture each other and those around us, John’s Gospel has handed us the pattern. You see, we are not stuck with only asking people if they have been “saved.” There’s no need for us to insist that people think the same way that we do. And we never have to scold people into being different than they are.

One simple question will show us which doors are open and which are closed in the people around us: “What are you looking for?” We can risk asking

that question or some version of it: “What is going on for you?” “What matters most to you?” Now, some people will not be open to those kinds of questions. We might be emptying water into a Dead Sea. But some will. Some will be open. And for those who do respond, John’s Jesus gave us a simple invitation: “Come and see,” but offered as more than just a quick look. We can invite people to “come and *behold*.”

If they are looking for spiritual healing, we can invite them to come and open their hearts to behold the presence of God – to bring their pain into the waters of God’s healing mercy. If they are looking for a community that will accept them just as they are, even if we disagree, we can offer them to come and open their whole selves, even just momentarily, so that God may reveal still more astounding truth to us all.

If they are curious to learn about God as love rather than as demanding lawgiver and judge – if they are looking for something more intimate than some ultimate philosophical principle, “come,” we can say, “and behold. Open yourself to the Risen Christ who is being poured out for us even now.”

If they consent to God, we can point out that God will abide with them and kindle the light of life within them. They may be enticed to join the life we are given in this sacred space. They may join us here to share in God’s life is poured out for us until it spills over into the lives around and beyond our banks. Here, where we behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And when we leave, we pass on the radiance of that loving light to all kinds of people.

What are they looking for? What, come to that, are you looking for?

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Works consulted:

Ross, Maggie. *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013.