

“What Are You Looking For?”

January 18, 2026

Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

Have you ever been in a job or a social situation, maybe with family or with a neighbor, where it felt like you were exactly where you were meant to be? Those times in our lives when life experience and education or training and circumstances all line up perfectly are really pretty rare, I think. At least they are in my experience. I don't know about you but I experience “imposter syndrome” quite a bit. Imposter syndrome is that feeling you get sometimes when you're called upon to do something, which you're qualified to do but you don't really feel equipped for. For many new parents it can be a constant state of being.

When I read passages like this one in Isaiah, where the speaker says God chose them from before they were born, I find that a little hard to relate to. What the speaker in Isaiah is saying is they have no doubts whatsoever about what they need to say and do in that moment. It feels to them as if they were created for it, to say these words, to do God's bidding. That's why, for Christians, identifying the speaker as Jesus makes so much sense. Throughout his ministry, Jesus in the gospels is portrayed as absolutely certain. He never gives the impression he doesn't really feel adequate to the task.

That's especially true in John's gospel. You may remember there is a moment in Matthew, Mark and Luke when Jesus questions his purpose. In Gethsemane he prays in agony to have this cup taken from him. But that scene is sort of turned on its head in John's gospel. There Jesus doesn't ask to be spared the cross; he says, “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” In John's gospel Jesus can never reveal any doubt about his purpose, much like the speaker in Isaiah.

But for most of us that kind of certainty is elusive. We're more like the followers around John who have been attracted to his message promising a mission for them. They're searching for meaning to their lives. They live in a world where they have very little control over events around them. Roman authorities have stripped them of their power, most of what they produce will go to feeding the Roman military machine, and they're finding little meaning in their traditions. Following Torah hasn't led them out of their predicament. But along comes John the Baptist with his exciting message of a new dawn on the horizon, someone coming who will change everything.

They want a piece of that. They want to know their lives matter, that they have something of value to contribute to the world. So, when John points out Jesus as the One who can show them the way, they don't hesitate to go after him. This call story is a little different from the ones we're more familiar with. Here Jesus doesn't go out recruiting followers; instead they come to him. And he confronts them with a question that gets at the heart of discipleship: What are you looking for?

What are we looking for? What do we want from our allegiance to Jesus? I suppose some are looking for peace of mind. We want to know our souls are safe and we'll be rewarded for our efforts when we die. But I don't get the feeling that John the Baptist or the Servant in Isaiah, or even Jesus, are only interested in the afterlife. All of them talk about what's happening now. They're all concerned with the condition of people's lives here. If we reduce Jesus' teachings to spiritual wisdom only, with no implications for our material lives, then the world, whose sin John says he comes to take away, will never be transformed.

When Jesus asks, "What are you looking for," he's giving us an invitation to imagine the kind of world we want to live in. The disciples who follow him have given up trusting the world they've been given. They're looking for an alternative. They want to be empowered to affect change in their world that can give their lives meaning. They're tired of being powerless, tired of standing by while people around them are mistreated or injured or killed. They're tired of seeing the sin of the world on display everywhere they turn. They're tired of living in darkness. Somewhere deep within they believe they're meant for something more.

And when we look around and see so much misery and poverty and injustice in our world, don't we want something more? This weekend we remember the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was driven by this desire for something more, not just for African Americans, but for our whole society. He truly believed we are capable of justice and compassion. But it meant recognizing our connection to one another. In a commencement address at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1961, he tells the students, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality; tied in a single garment of destiny....Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be."

That sense of interdependence and shared vision is exactly what the powers of this world want to eliminate. It's how the Romans kept control of the populations they conquered. They set different factions against each other, created divisions to occupy people's energy so they couldn't see their mutual interests. That's the sin of the world the Lamb of God comes to take away. In Christ we're invited to discover our common condition. Through his teachings and sacrifice we learn we are all bound together, responsible for each other's well-being.

In King's day that meant dismantling segregation and providing opportunities for people of color who had been systematically denied access to education, housing and healthcare, as well as social mobility and wealth creation. Today, while we are still working on those concerns, we're seeing an attempt to divide us over citizenship status and gender identity. There are forces in our society and government that want to keep us divided against each other. What's happening in Minneapolis today, the violence, the intimidation, is a model for what some want all across the country. But is that really what we're looking for? Do we really want to see our neighbors as our enemies?

I believe what we're looking for is a world where people can live in peace, a world where we can find meaning through reaching out in compassion to one another and not hide from each other out of fear. Jesus offers his followers a path that takes them into the world, so they can live for the world, and not escape it. As Isaiah says about God's hope for God's servant, we're meant to be a light to the nations so God's salvation can reach everywhere, can reach everyone. That's

not about converting everybody, making everyone believe the same thing. It's about seeing our connection to each other and taking responsibility for one another's well-being and wholeness.

As King says, we are all tied in a single garment of destiny. That's an idea the sin of the world resists. This notion that we have a connection to one another that transcends nationality or heritage or skin color is a threat to those in the world who want to hold onto power at all costs. And when we commit ourselves to that vision, when we decide that's what we're looking for, we put ourselves in danger. We become a target for retribution when we walk the path that Jesus walks.

So, he's asking each of us, "What are you looking for?" What kind of a world do we want to build? Whatever it is it begins with us. The world we're seeking, the world God is calling us to build begins with our willingness to set aside comfort and security and align ourselves with those we've been taught aren't worth our time, the ones we've been taught are expendable. Only when we see them as sisters and brothers and recognize the network of mutuality we share, only then will we be moving toward the world God is looking for. Jesus, the Lamb of God, shows us the way through compassion, justice and generosity, sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others. The sin of the world cannot stand against disciples committed to the way of Christ. So long as we follow that path, there is hope for us all.

Amen