

# THE QUESTION

Sermon, January 15, 2023

Text: John 1:35-42; I Corinthians 1:1-9

In his unique account of Jesus' life, John's whole writing style is radically different from Matthew, Mark or Luke's (those three are known as the Synoptic Gospels ... "syn" meaning "with" or "together"; "optic" meaning "seen." "Synoptic" in its simplest definition means "similar," as in "seen together" ... though each Gospel is unique, the first three follow a similar historical and chronological sequence of events in the earthly life of Jesus). John uses literary license to create a persuasive account of the Gospel. He IS writing factually, but he is not necessarily writing chronologically ... the chronological order of events in Jesus' life are rearranged in John's literary style to convey a persuasive and philosophically convincing account of the Gospel for a largely non-Jewish audience (a few quick examples: in our reading, Simon was called Peter by Jesus at the very outset, something Matthew and Mark tells us happened two and a half years *into* Jesus' public ministry. In John 2, Jesus drives the moneychangers out of the Temple, an event the other Gospels have just days prior to His crucifixion. It would take a while to explain this fully, but suffice it to say for now John is not contradicting the other Gospels; he is not writing chronologically so much as he is presenting a thematic, persuasive overview. John puts this at the beginning as if to introduce that Jesus was coming to re-work everything, to purify the entire faith structure of Judaism). And I just summarized an entire seminary course in about three minutes. Suffice it to say for now that for John, it is not so important *when* Jesus did or said something as it is *THAT* Jesus did or say it.

John begins his Gospel with this grand, sweeping, majestic introduction that goes back before the beginning of time itself introducing this Word that was with God and this Word that was God, through Whom all things were made, and how this Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... and then the very first words John has the Word speaking are in the form of a **question**. That's significant! The very first words from the lips of Jesus in John's account are a question, John 1:38 -- "*What are you seeking?*" I think John has Jesus asking this question in a more philosophical and/or existential manner, as if to say, "*What is it you are seeking? What is your quest, what is your search, what are you looking for in your life?*" And I think these two men reply, in so many words, "*Uh ... our answer will take longer than a few moments. Where are you staying? Can we come over and talk?*" The next words the author John has coming out of The Word's mouth are, "*Come and you will see.*" Perhaps as if to say, "*Come meet with Me. Spend time with Me, and you will see. Engage with Me, and you will find what you seek, you will find what you are yearning for.*" John tells us they went with Him, and spent a day with Him ... and that day changed everything for them. Thus, John in this first chapter sets the stage for his persuasive account of the Gospel, inviting his readers and all who seek to **come and see** and learn about this Word of God become flesh in Jesus.

As I mentioned when we've looked at this in the past, being a product of my generation, I'm reminded of the lyrics of the 1970 hit pop song "**Question**" by the Moody Blues. Some lyrics: "*Why do we never get an answer, when we're knocking at the door, with a thousand million questions, about hate and death and war?*" And then this mellow refrain: "*... I'm looking for someone to change my life, I'm looking for a miracle in my life!*" Those lyrics struck a deep chord (pun intended) in many and that song shot to the top of the charts in 1970 because that really is a universal quest ... looking for some one or some thing to change our lives, some one or some thing who can work miracles in our lives, some one or some thing who can help give our lives stability, meaning, purpose, hope. Well, John has Jesus leading off the "concert" of his Gospel account with "THE Question" -- "*What do you seek?*" Everyone seeks; everyone is on a quest for meaning and hope and purpose! Putting Jesus' invitation, "*Come and you will see*" at the beginning of his account, John is intimating, "*Come and see this Jesus about Whom I write, come have an encounter with this Jesus, come and meet with this Jesus to find what you really seek ... the rest of this written account is all about this living Word.*"

Now hold that thought for a few moments.

In 1 Corinthians 1:1 we read, "*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes.*" Who is Sosthenes, the co-signatory of this letter? We are introduced to a Sosthenes in Acts 18, where we read about the beginnings of that Corinthian church; I recommend you take time to read that chapter perhaps later today. At that time in Acts 18, Sosthenes was the head of the large and prestigious synagogue in Corinth. Under Sosthenes' leadership, the synagogue had taken Paul to court, initiating criminal proceedings against him. The judge was Gallio, a famous Roman judge (for you history buffs, Gallio was the elder brother of Roman philosopher Seneca). Gallio dismissed the case, publicly ridiculing the Jewish community by ejecting them all from his court, and the angry Jewish community in turn apparently took out their frustrations on poor Sosthenes by beating him up for having led them into this public debacle! We are not told what happened to Sosthenes after this beating, but we can make an educated guess. If it's the same Sosthenes mentioned in our lectionary text this morning, which is

highly likely, it seems he went on to become a believer under Paul's ministry and a colleague of the man he had tried to harm! Sosthenes apparently found an answer to his quest in the Jesus Paul talked about ... and became part of the Christian community. Now, having been head of the large and prestigious Corinth synagogue, Sosthenes naturally would have a wide circle of friends and acquaintances who would be intensely interested in what was going on with him and what was happening in his life. His public endorsement of Paul displayed in co-writing this letter would give Paul instant credibility with those who knew and respected Sosthenes. Sosthenes apparently wants his friends and fellow Jews to learn about the grace and goodness of Jesus Christ, just as he had, through the ministry of Paul. Being named as a co-author and/or endorser of this letter, perhaps Sosthenes is saying to all those in his circle of influence, echoing the Moody Blues, "*Listen to this man! He will tell you about Someone who will change your life, someone who can work a miracle in your life, as He has done for me!*"

Like Sosthenes, John the Baptist also had a circle of influence, people who listened to him, people who followed him, a group of disciples he had gathered. Like Sosthenes, John the Baptist wants those in his circle of influence to see Jesus, he wants them to learn about the grace and goodness and miracle working power of Jesus Christ. So in our Gospel reading today he says in so many words, "*Look, the Lamb of God! Take a good look! Listen to this man!*" Now, see yourself as Sosthenes. See yourself as John. Whether you realize it or not, there are people in your life who know you and who trust you and who respect you. There are people who might even follow your example, people who listen to your words and observe your life and may be curious about what makes you tick. They are on a quest, too! A quest for meaning, purpose, stability, hope! Like John and Sosthenes, let's do what we can to bring those people in our lives to a place where they, too, can take a good look at the Lamb of God.

This is what Andrew also did. According to the Gospel of John, Andrew was the first of the twelve disciples of Jesus. First he was a disciple of John the Baptist, and then he decided to follow Jesus. In the Orthodox tradition Andrew is called *Protopoulos*, or the *First-called*. The first thing this first disciple did was to introduce his brother to Jesus. There was something about Jesus that sent Andrew running to find his brother and say, "*You have to meet this man!*" So Simon Peter wound up becoming a disciple because his brother brought him to come and see Jesus.

When we've looked at this lectionary passage in years past, I've asked, "*Who were the Andrews, the Sosthenes-es, the Johns, in your life? Who brought you to a place where you could meet and/or learn about Jesus?*" Maybe it was one or both of your parents; maybe it was a friend. Maybe it was a sibling, a grandparent, an uncle, an aunt. Maybe a Sunday School teacher, a youth leader, or some celebrity who publicly displayed his/her faith. I know I can gratefully name many faithful Andrews, Johns, and Sosthenes in my life, people who brought me to a place where I could see and meet and learn about Jesus for myself. And an important related question is this: "*Who's Andrew, John or Sosthenes are you?*" I hope all of you can enjoy the immense satisfaction of knowing that someone is sitting in some church worshipping today because you have been a faithful Andrew or Sosthenes or John and brought them to a place where they could come and see, come and meet, come and learn about, Jesus. Studies have shown some 80% of those who come to a new or a renewed faith in Jesus and join a local church do so because someone simply invited them to "*Come and see.*" Perhaps the person doing the inviting didn't know a lot about the Bible, maybe he or she couldn't really articulate the faith well or explain the doctrine of the Trinity, but the person simply said, "*Come and see. Come and hear our choir. Come join us at 39ers or youth fellowship. Come and enjoy the company of a friendly congregation. Come and worship with us. Come and see!*" That's something every one of us can do, inviting people to come and see.

In polite society, we tell ourselves there are two things we don't talk about: Religion and Politics. Why? Because both usually lead to arguments. A bit of an aside ... I'm fearful free speech is recently and increasingly endangered in our country, civilized and principled debate seems to be becoming increasingly rare. Dissenting and/or religious voices are being increasingly banned, suppressed, censored, shut up and shut down ... and not just on social media! People who disagree are demonized, labeled dangerous, seditious, hurtful. We are losing the ability to have a real, honest, principled and courteous debate between civilized people. But that's another sermon. This sermon is not about arguing religion or politics; this is about simply saying in love and respect, "*Come and see.*"

I simply do not believe people are not interested in matters of faith today; there are many who are just waiting for someone to invite them to "Come and See." This does not mean you have to be perfect (*good luck with that*), nor does it mean the church has to be perfect (*and good luck with that!*). **The One we worship is perfect, not us** ... and He promises to be always present whenever two or three gather in His name. People are seeking for Someone who can change their lives, work miracles in their lives, bringing hope, authenticity, community AND a genuine sense of God's presence and reality into their lives.

They really are. Through your deeds, through your words, through your answers to their questions ... be a Sosthenes, be a John the Baptist, be an Andrew, and invite them to "Come and see."