

Epiphany 2A 2017, January 15, 2017, John 1:29-42, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

What are you looking for? Jesus asks Andrew and this other un-named disciple who follow him one day on a stroll. But he might just as well be asking you. What are you looking for?

What are you looking for today, as you come here to worship? Are you looking for an uplifting and inspiring sermon, something to help you through the day, the week? That's a pretty tall order for a preacher, believe me. Are you looking for the fellowship of this community, people you know and love and trust, who share the same faith you do? Are you looking for a word of grace and forgiveness, to heal the "things you've done and left undone" as we confess each week? Are you looking for the intimate spiritual connection with Jesus offered in Holy Communion, his own promised presence with you? I certainly hope you will find all this and even more as you come to worship this morning.

Returning to our gospel text, Andrew and this other disciple are following Jesus, and he turns and asks them "What are you looking for?" And they respond, "Where are you staying?" Really? That's all they could come up with? Where are you hanging out? Not, "what's the meaning of life?" Or, "Are you really the Messiah?" Or, "when do we get world peace?" After all, this guy they're following has just been identified by John the Baptist as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'" That's pretty impressive. It's not everyday that someone gets identified as taking away all the sins in the world. You can understand their curiosity by wanting to follow behind Jesus and see what he's up to. But it still seems a bit more than lame to ask him, "where are you staying."

Here's where our English translations don't always serve us well when we're trying to understand a passage from the Bible. It sounds weak and a more than a little clueless when we're told that they respond with "where are you staying?" But John our gospel writer is weaving together a thread that we don't always catch when we hear this passage. So listen again to some highlighted sections from this morning's gospel: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." And then again, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And the part we've been considering so far: "They (meaning the two disciples of John) said to him 'rabbi' (which means Teacher), 'where are you staying.'" And finally, "They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day." It's those verbs, variously translated as "remained," "remain," and "staying" that I want you to pay attention to.

Maybe the best way to make my point is to use a little bit of old-fashioned English and let you hear these same passages from The American Standard Version of the Bible, a version your grandparents might have been familiar with over a hundred years ago.

"And John bare witness, saying, I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon him. **33** And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize in water, he said unto me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and abiding upon him, the same is he that baptizeth in the Holy Spirit." And then later on: "And Jesus turned, and beheld them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? And they said unto him, Rabbi (which is to say, being interpreted, Teacher), where abideth thou? **39** He saith unto them, Come, and ye shall see. They came therefore and saw where he abode; and they abode with him that day: it was about the tenth hour."

The word John uses is, of course, “abide.” It becomes a very important word later on in the gospel. In the 15th chapter Jesus says “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” The fruit we bear is a result of the love of the Father for the Son, a love in which the Son himself abides. And the Father sends the Advocate, the Spirit of truth whom we know, because he abides with you and in you.

So listen to some of these verses again from our gospel reading, now translated using a word familiar to us from John’s gospel. “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abided on him.” “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and abide is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” The said to him, “Rabbi, where are you abiding?” “They came and saw where he was abiding, and they abided with him that day.” John probably makes use of a pun here, because Jesus doesn’t possess an earthly abode, he doesn’t point to a particular place where he resides. Here the first disciples, Andrew and this un-named follower of Jesus, abide with Jesus and he with them. Not in a physical place, but in that beginning relationship of disciple and teacher which figures so prominently in this gospel.

John makes frequent use of this word “abide,” more than any other writer in the New Testament. Our abiding with Christ and in Christ happens because Christ abides with us and in us and among us. For Christ to abide with us is sheer gift as the mutual abiding of the Son with the Father and the Father with the Son and the Spirit who is sent to abide with those who belong to Christ. The love of Christ which abides in us and in which we abide as his disciples grants us complete joy as Jesus promises.

So let me return to the original question Jesus asks Andrew and his companion, and which he also asks you and me. What are you looking for? The question could be even more far reaching and deeper than what we seek here in worship. Maybe you’re looking for a deeper healing in your life. An illness of body or soul or human relationship chronic and persistent. A rift between your own sense of self and the body you inhabit; or a rift between you and a family member, torn apart by hurt or anger or neglect or abuse? What are you looking for? Maybe some way to make a difference in a world that seems to have grown so much more callous and cruel, a place to serve others when it seems like so many simply want to serve themselves. What are you looking for?

So Andrew’s response and ours doesn’t seem so shallow after all. “Where are you abiding, Jesus?” Where is that place where you are always there and we might always be there with you? The good news for us today is that Jesus is already abiding with us, as he promises. Jesus already creates and sustains the relationship with each of his children, begun in Holy Baptism, nurtured in the community of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, guided by the grace of the Father. Jesus remains as close to us as we are to ourselves, never leaving us, always with us, even to the close of the age as he promises.

So in the midst of the most profound questions we have and in seeking for the deepest healing and restoration possible it’s important to trust and hold onto this promise of our Lord. He is literally “staying with us” wherever we are. In our joys and in our sorrows, in our faith and in our doubts, in our questions and in our confident trust. Jesus abides with you and with me, even as we abide with him. Amen.