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John 1.29-42

“What are *you* looking for?”

Shopping on line is the thing to do these days. Whether it's for Christmas or anniversaries or birthdays, it's great to be able to get what you want with a few clicks and without having to circle the parking lot half a dozen times to find a spot 300 yards from the store entrance. It's great to avoid the crowds, and the traipsing from one store to the other looking for what no one seems to have in stock. On line, it seems you can get anything, no fuss no muss. The thing is, though, you have to be out in front of things a little in order to shop on line. You can't be the type of person who waits until the last minute. You have to be the type who thinks ahead. You can't be a procrastinator.

So I usually hit the malls. And I've more or less come to accept that about myself, and have taught myself to tolerate the crowds, and the people who park over the line and leave me precious little room to open my car door, forcing me to my tiptoes in a kind of vaguely Caribbean dance number in order to get out. I've learned a measure of equanimity in the midst of poorly organized sales racks and other customers who don't seem to know where the line starts. These are the dues I have to pay, is the way I figure it. But what gets me every time, what I never seem to be prepared for, is a certain feeling that wells up from my stomach when I enter a department store which I know shows clearly in my face. The feeling is trying to tell me something, and that message is this: “You don't really know what you're here for, do you?” Now, I know I'm supposed to acquire some kind of gift—I'm pretty clear about that. I know that I'm supposed to come home with the goods or not to come home at all, in some cases. But the array of choices, none of which seems like an obvious winner, always makes me feel like any plans I brought with me have miserably failed to predict the realities on the ground.

I don't know if any of you have been in these kinds of situations, but it seems to me that the last person you want to talk to in these situations is the store clerk. Because the store clerk, I believe, is the one who is charged with the task of interpreting that feeling welling up from your stomach, in case you haven't gotten the message. “May I help you find something” is usually the mechanism. “No thanks, I'm just looking,” is the automated response, uttered through the anxiety created by the possibility that he will then ask, “Are you looking for something in particular?” “Well, yes, in fact, something that will get me out of this (pick your favorite modifier here) store and put me out of my misery, if you don't mind.”

None of us likes not knowing. We don't enjoy not knowing where we are going, or what we are looking for. We don't appreciate confusion and uncertainty. We are unhinged by lack of clarity and focus. But the trouble is that all of that seems to be a feature of the human condition. We often enter the department store at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour and realize that our plans aren't adequate and we don't know which aisle to try first.

And it seems to me that we like to be confronted with our uncertainty even less. No one relishes being put on the spot. No one enjoys having situations of decision forced on him or her. In some ways it seems better to wander aimlessly, up and down aisle after aisle, than to have to take on the burden of decision. After all, we could make a mistake. Someone could disapprove. We could get ourselves into trouble. We could lose our reputation in a campaign of whispers.

The earliest disciples of Jesus were in a similar situation. It was unclear to them what they might reasonably expect from a Messiah, particularly one from the hillsides of Galilee. They did show themselves eager to follow, perhaps with vague ideas about throwing off oppression and having a better life. But it was dangerous being a follower of a Messiah in a world of armed oppression, and they didn't have a plan that was adequate to the facts on the ground. In other words, the disciples were drifting, hopeful and expectant but unclear about what they were expecting.

Jesus plays the role of the annoying store clerk, who won't take "no thanks, I'm just looking" for an answer. Jesus confronts the disciples with that dreaded follow-up question, "What are you looking *for*?"

This is a great way to begin the story, as it turns out, because what the disciples end up finding is that following Jesus does not resolve this basic question. The question is to endure. They don't get an easy answer to what they should expect. They don't get an instant resolution to their problems in the form of a military Messiah who would hand them a better life on a silver platter. What they get is a suffering servant, a Lamb of God. What they get is a radically reorienting frame of reference in which the greatest would be least and the least would be greatest. What they get is a deep, incisive question about what they would commit themselves to, what they would stake their lives on, and how it would change them from the inside out.

It becomes progressively clearer as the story unfolds that Jesus is going to let them down. If we understand any one thing from the gospel stories we need to understand this: Jesus lets his disciples down! He doesn't meet their expectations—not even close. His job approval ratings tank. He is, as Meryl Streep's character Miranda Priestly says of her personal assistants in *The Devil Wears Prada*, "a great disappointment."

Why? Because following Jesus doesn't do what we all often want. It doesn't relieve his disciples of their fears and anxieties—it requires of them that they face those fears head on. Following Jesus doesn't allow them to rest in the comfortable position of a child-like dependent who hears good news about what will be done for her or him, but requires that they be mature adults who *make* good news, by the grace of God given to them. In other words, following him means that they have to make a fundamental, life-changing *decision* to follow him, through many dangers, toils and snares. They have to stop drifting and take up a purpose. They have to take risks and brave disapproval and have the courage to shout over the deafening campaign of whispers.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, every young would-be fashion designer wants to work with fashion mogul Miranda Priestly, but they all fear her. She is opinionated, ruthless, and easily disappointed with her protégés. A young woman named Andrea Sachs whose life ambition is journalism and not fashion responds to an ad and ends up getting the job. Andrea is smart, confident, and not at all interested in climbing the fashion ladder. So, since she does not live in constant fear of disappointing Miranda, she of course succeeds. In the end, her desire to be a journalist and not a fashion superstar causes her to leave her job with Miranda, and Miranda writes in a letter of reference that Andrea has been the "biggest disappointment of all—and you'd be a fool not to hire her."

Andrea Sachs evokes the kind of disappointment born of respect. It's the kind of disappointment that recognizes resolve and clarity of purpose. Jesus disappointed his disciples. He flunked his Messiah-evaluations. His disciples went on to disappoint many others, I'm sure, because as they followed Jesus they quit drifting and started living.

We mainline Protestants face a problem. We are so afraid of offending anyone, so anxious to please anyone we possibly can, so we can stop dwindling in numbers or at least dwindle less precipitously, that we make ourselves a little ridiculous. Living out of the fear of whispering, we diminish our standards and we refuse to take stands. As a result, we merely drift rather than taking bold steps. But the fact is that no one can be disappointed in us because people stopped having expectations of us a long time ago. We are basically uninteresting to most, because, as research as well as common sense show, nothing is less attractive than someone who will try anything to attract.

Jesus poses the same question to us disciples today: What are *you* looking for? What decision will you make? What Messiah will you follow? What fears will you face and what opportunities will you embrace? I hope somebody is disappointed by the decisions that you and I make. Amen.