

“What Are You Looking For?”

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Wall Street United Church, Sunday January 18th 2026

Scripture: John 1:29–30, 32–42

Most of us spend our lives looking for something. For me it's my keys and water bottle! But seriously, we do have a spiritual longing in each us. Sometimes we know what it is, sometimes we don't. Sometimes we only recognize it once we've already found it! What we are looking for matters — which is why Jesus asks the first disciples, before anything else:

“What are you looking for?” It's still a question for all of us as Christians today.

This Sunday marks the beginning of the **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**. Christians around the world are praying this week not because we all agree, but because we all belong — to Christ, and to one another. We're unified in one sense because we're all seeking to answer that question. We're unified by our baptism. To understand that, we need to situate this story we just heard. It's located very near the beginning of John's Gospel, but it's not *the* beginning.

John's Gospel is written much later than the others and begins very differently from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There are no angels or shepherds. No manger. No birth story at all.

Instead, the first thing we hear is poetry, and you may recall this was the Gospel reading from two weeks ago: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* And then the beautiful declaration *“Jesus is the light of the world.”*

The Gospel of John begins with creation itself. He wants us to think of the Book of Genesis, which is why he begins with the same words: *“In the beginning”*. What was there?

Light and darkness. Word and breath. God intimately involved with the world God loves. So intimately that it says *“The Word became flesh”* (John 1:14). The Word became flesh in Jesus. That's the entire infancy narrative for John.

John the Gospel writer is writing for a somewhat isolated community asking big questions: *Who is Jesus? What is God like? How do we live faithfully in a broken world?* Questions we still ask! And John answers those questions with a real emphasis on a profound theology. He shows us something deep, that the God revealed in Jesus is the same God who spoke creation into being.

Just as Genesis 1 moves from light and darkness to land to water, John's Gospel moves us from cosmic poetry into the wilderness — to the Jordan River — where John the Baptist is standing knee-deep in the messy, ordinary stuff of creation.

John the Baptist is the voice Isaiah prophesied crying out in the wilderness — not calling people out of the world, but calling them deeper into it. Calling them to repentance — not as punishment, but as re-orientation. A turning. A change in how we live. Remember that Greek word *metanoia* that I've mentioned before? It means transformation, which is what repentance is.

John the Baptist is embedded in the real world. And it is that fact that (paradoxically!) allows him to experience the divine so profoundly. He doesn't look away from the problems of the world. He doesn't look away from Truth. John knows exactly who he is—and who he is not. He is not the Messiah.

He does not cling to authority or admiration even when he could. Andrew is his disciple first after all.

And when he speaks of Jesus, he also points away from power or dominance.

“Here is the Lamb of God.”

Not a ruler. Not a warrior. *A lamb.*

Think of all the themes John the Gospel writer has introduced so far in his Gospel — *Light. Water. The Lamb.* And then a dove descending, echoing the Spirit hovering over the waters in Genesis.

While I was preparing this message, I came across this quote from theologian Cody J. Sanders (WorkingPreacher.com) who said:

Preaching amid climate collapse, a planet on the brink, our life and death bound up with the fate of the multitude of other species, what would it mean to take the image of God's Spirit incarnate in a dove as a sign of God's presence with all creation?

Creation itself becomes the language for describing who Jesus is. The Gospel writer is telling us that the world testifies to God's presence — and that we are meant to testify too. John the Baptist — sometimes called John the Testifier — does this not only with his words, but with his life. And when he speaks, because he is so authentically part of the world, something extraordinary happens. His disciples listen. They trust him. And they follow Jesus. And then everything in the story slows down when Jesus, the Word, the Lamb, the Light, finally speaks:

“What are you looking for?”

Not: What do you believe?

Not: What doctrine do you accept?

Not: Will you follow me?

“What are you looking for?”

The question assumes they're looking for something. And honestly, as I said, I believe that most people *are* looking for something deeper in their lives. Sometimes we humans focus on things that lead us astray, but that doesn't mean we're not looking. There is a spiritual thirst in all of us. Coming together as a church makes it easier for us to explore that.

These first two disciples — Andrew and the unnamed disciple — seem a little caught off guard by the question. So they respond with a question of their own, but not before first naming Jesus as teacher: "*Rabbi*". They ask: "Rabbi, where are you staying?" It's important to note that the word John uses for "staying" is the same word he will later use for "abiding." The disciples are asking: "*Where does your life take root?*"

They are asking whether Jesus, who **is** the Light, also truly belongs to this world, just as John the Baptist does. And Jesus answers with an invitation that defines discipleship in this Gospel: **"Come and see."**

Right there, the power of hospitality and of invitation. It's an invitation still extended to us. Come and see what is possible if we respond to God's invitation! Notice what happens next in the scripture passage. Andrew does not keep this experience to himself. He goes and finds his brother Simon.

This is how faith spreads in John's Gospel. One voice to another. One life touching the next. Just as our lives are touched by our new members this morning, who have accepted an invitation from this community and from God. John the Baptist testifies. Jesus invites. The disciples follow. Then Andrew calls Simon. And the circle keeps widening—generation after generation—across languages, cultures, and traditions—until it reaches us.

This is why the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity matters. Our faith was never meant to be hoarded — it was meant to be shared! Christians calling to one another, testifying together to a world God loves. And if God is in creation, as the Gospel of John and John the Baptist testify, then we need to turn our hearts and hands to the world as well.

The Gospel of John returns to this theme of hospitality, and invites us in, all the way through Jesus' life—and beyond it. What fascinates me is how the way the Gospel begins is mirrored in how it ends. John's Gospel begins in creation. And John's Gospel ends... in a garden.

John is the only Gospel writer who tells us that Jesus' tomb was in a garden. And when Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ, she mistakes him for the gardener. And maybe—just maybe—she's not wrong.

Because this is the Word through whom all things came into being.
Jesus is not something separate from the One who breathes life into dust.
The One who tends, restores, and renews creation.

And listen closely to what happens in that garden. The risen Jesus speaks to Mary, and once again, he asks a question: **“Whom do you seek?”**

It is the same question, asked differently. The question that began the Gospel now shapes its ending. “What are you looking for? Whom do you seek?” And it is Mary who answers. She is the woman whose witness will first carry resurrection into the world. She answers with the same word that the first two disciples used:

“Rabbouni.” Teacher.

John’s Gospel will not let us forget this: the good news is not entrusted only to the powerful, or the polished, or the certain. It is entrusted to those who seek, who love, who stay. To those who understand that Jesus’s words and his life are our teacher, here in this world. God is not distant. God is not removed. God is present—in flesh, in water, in soil, in breath.

Which brings us back, again, to the Lamb of God. A lamb has no defenses. That puts God with the vulnerable in this world. And just as a lamb has no defenses, Neither do wetlands. Or coral reefs. Or future generations. Neither do people sleeping outside in the cold. Neither do children caught in war and conflict. So if we want to be on God’s side, we need to be on the side of all the ways that creation is vulnerable. Including humanity. We need to be knee deep in it, just as John the Baptist was in the Jordan. Our baptism has to mean something.

When Jesus asks us, “What are you looking for?” perhaps our answers sound something like this: We are looking for a world where creation is cherished.

A world where truth is spoken, even from the wilderness.

A world where community matters more than accumulation.

Where justice matters more than comfort.

Where love is stronger than death.

We don’t look for this alone. Today, Christians around the world on the week of prayer for Christian unity are reaching out to each other. We can work together for a better world. The United Church of Canada has always believed in unity and always sought justice.

So today, as an action for Christian unity, I invite you to watch the video we’re going to show in just a moment. After the service I invite you to consider signing on to the declaration they will talk about in the video, one which our moderator Kimberly has also publicly endorsed along with Christian leaders all over the world.

Why would we do this? Because Christ still asks the question.

What are you looking for? And the invitation that follows is still the same: **Come and see!**
Amen!