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## Seeking and Finding: Incarnational Ministry in John's Gospel

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# Seeking and Finding: Incarnational Ministry in John's Gospel

D'ESTA LOVE

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**M**inistry in the Gospel of John is embedded in the incarnation of the Word and initiated by God who sends his Son into the world. Thus, the Word becomes flesh and lives among us, seeking those who would believe and follow. As he finds them, he extends an invitation, "Come and see." Let us accept this invitation and follow Jesus through this Gospel. As we turn the pages, we will come to see where God dwells and discover the place from which all Christian service receives its authenticity and power.

## **THE WORD MADE FLESH**

In the prologue to his Gospel (1.1-18) John transports his readers into the heavenly realm, where we catch a glimpse of the pre-existent Christ. Then John reveals the astonishing truth of his Gospel. The eternal Word, who from the beginning was with God and is God, became flesh. Furthermore, he dwelt among us. As Eugene Peterson writes in his paraphrase of the New Testament, he "moved into the neighborhood."

Thus, we are introduced to the incarnate God of heaven who walks among us. As this reality sinks in, John draws our attention from the expanse of eternity and the vision of the Word before time to the Jordan River, a particular place located within the bounds of time (1.19). As John marks day one (1.19-28), we find a man of the earth, John the Baptist, bearing testimony to the priests and Levites from Jerusalem (1.19) that he is not the Messiah, Elijah, or a prophet. He is not the light (1.8a). On the second day (1.29-34) Jesus moves into the neighborhood, and John the Baptist testifies to the light (1.8b), "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (1.29). Still marking time, John tells us that on the following day (1.35-42) Jesus makes another appearance and on this day, in this moment in time, the Word made flesh speaks for the first time in this Gospel. We might expect the Word—the *Logos* of God—to say something like, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" or, "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly." But to our surprise he says something very ordinary. He asks a question, "What are you looking for?" (1.38).

Let us recapture the scene. John is with his disciples at the Jordan River, baptizing and bearing witness concerning Jesus. As Jesus walks by, John exclaims, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (1.36). Two of John's disciples go after Jesus, and he asks them, "What are you looking for?" The disciples respond with a question of their own, "Where are you staying?" and Jesus answers, "Come and see" (1.39). It is a casual conversation, but as readers of John's Gospel we hear hints of deeper realities and suspect that this exchange is about more than the disciples' desire to know where Jesus is spending the night.

What are these deeper realities? This casual conversation underscores christological themes and implications for discipleship. This is certainly the case when Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?" Robert Kysar notes that throughout his Gospel John addresses the motives of those who seek Jesus and that "the question

he places on Jesus' lips here also calls for an examination of motives for discipleship."<sup>1</sup> This is particularly consistent with the writer's careful attention to note that the two disciples "followed" Jesus (1.37, 38). Further, the curious question about the place where Jesus is staying advances a theme concerning Jesus' identity already suggested in the prologue—the eternal Word "became flesh and lived among us" (1.14). We might restate the question consistent with the Gospel's message, "Where does God dwell?" At any rate, Jesus' response to their question, "Come and see," is the invitation of John's Gospel and it seems to echo the earlier invitation of John the Baptist, "Behold, the Lamb of God." For John the theme of "seeing" equates to believing, which is necessary for discipleship and life in the name of Jesus. Thus, this casual conversation holds this Gospel's promise. It accomplishes two things: it examines the motives for discipleship and it entices the disciples and the readers to follow Jesus and to see the place where God dwells.

This approach to narrative and discourse is characteristic of the development of John's Gospel. The Word becomes flesh and moves into the neighborhood. He attends a wedding with his mother (2.1-11). The disciples have also been invited. It is a casual story until we learn that the wine runs out. On another day we see Jesus on a journey through Samaria (4.1-42). He grows weary, he is thirsty, he stops by a well to rest, and he asks for a drink of water. These are the casual details of a narrative that soon reveals the divine intent in an encounter with a Samaritan woman. Another day he sits with his disciples on a mountainside (6.1-14). A large crowd gathers and there is a boy with five barley loaves and two fish. It is a story grounded in the ordinary stuff of life, yet it becomes a discourse on Jesus as the Bread of Life (6.22-59). We come to understand that bread is more than physical bread; that living water is more than water from a spring; and water turned to wine signals the new wine of the new age. Casual details rooted in the life of flesh take on christological significance and carry implications for discipleship and ministry.

### WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

As suggested, Jesus' question, "What are you looking for?" not only examines motives for discipleship, it also advances the theme of seeking and finding. For example, in the narrative of the gathering of Jesus' first disciples (1.35-51), we are introduced to Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathaniel, whose stories are woven together by this very theme. Andrew brings his brother Simon to Jesus, exclaiming "We have found the Messiah" (1.41). In turn Jesus seeks and finds Philip. Philip finds Nathaniel and brings him to Jesus. There is a sense of mutuality. Jesus seeks and finds his earliest disciples, who in turn seek and find Jesus. Further, as these disciples witness to and invite one another, they use Jesus' own words, "Come and see" (1.47). Their confessions and invitations create a chain reaction resulting in a growing number of followers. One disciple finds Jesus and in turn testifies to another. Does not this rhythm of seeking and finding, coming and seeing, provide a model for a ministry of witness?

What we learn in the gathering of Jesus' first disciples concerning the themes of seeking and finding is carried forward within the Gospel. In Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well (4.7-42) it is clear that she seeks a living spring so that she will no longer have to come alone to a public well, at a public hour, to draw water. Jesus, on the other hand, seeks true worshippers who will worship him in Spirit and truth. In the end, he finds them in this Samaritan village by means of the proclamation of the woman who sought water and found the "Savior of the world" (4.42).

In the sixth chapter Jesus feeds the 5,000 and offers them the bread of life that they might eat and live. The crowd subsequently follows the disciples to Capernaum "looking for Jesus" (6.24). In this negative example, they seek him, Jesus says, not because they saw signs, but because they ate their fill of the loaves (6.26). To the crowd he says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (6.27). What are they looking for? The implication is that the crowds are looking for Jesus, not because he is the bread of life but because he offers them bread to eat and

1. John Kyser, "John," *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 38.

water from a spring. Loaves and fish are not like the bread of heaven that we might eat and live. Water from a spring or from Jacob's well is not like the gift of God that we might drink and live. Thus, Jesus' penetrating question, "What are you looking for?" carefully reveals our motives as disciples.

### WHERE ARE YOU STAYING?

The disciples' question, "Where are you staying?" is as unexpected as Jesus' question about what they are seeking. An answer such as "truth" or "understanding" or "peace" might seem more direct. But they want to know where he is staying. Robert Barron notes the oddity of the disciples' "nonanswer" but explains its consistency with John's language. "In the mystical vocabulary of John's Gospel, the verb *menein* (stay or remain) refers to the source of one's life and meaning. Therefore, in asking where he 'stays,' the disciples are wondering about the form of life that sustains him, the source of his power."<sup>2</sup> To their inquiry Jesus extends an invitation to come and see, and John tells us, "They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day" (1.39). This emphasis on remaining with Jesus recalls the baptism of Jesus at which time the Spirit descended as a dove and "remained on him" (1.33). There is something here that suggests more than a casual conversation and introduces themes that are important to John's Gospel.

As we turn the pages, we hear Jesus say that he came from the Father and is returning to the Father. These two realities reside in tension with each other, and the prospect of his leaving fills the disciples with concern. Perhaps they might ask him once again, "Where are you staying?" Within the context of his leaving, Jesus speaks reassuring words of love and return. He also transforms their understanding of the place where Jesus dwells—and it includes them. He speaks comfort and hope to the disciples as he promises to prepare dwelling places for them in his Father's house. Thus, in the last discourses of chapters 14 and 16 he reveals the nature of life indwelt by the Spirit, lived in the presence of God, and in fellowship with Jesus.

As Jesus anticipates the disciples' fears he promises not to desert them, but to ask the Father to send the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, who will remain with them to help them in their task in the world. He also draws them into a divine circle of fellowship in which they share the mutual life of the Spirit, the Father and the Son (14.10, 16-21), based on knowledge and permeated with the Father's love.

The image of the vine in chapter 15 intensifies Jesus' meaning. The disciples' new life, embedded in the vine, is secure in the love of God. The love they have for God and each other, and the love they receive, offers a contrast to the hatred they experience in a hostile world. Their connection to the vine gives them life and places them under the provisional care of God. Furthermore, the life-giving force of the vine is the love of God, and love is the fruit that is reproduced in the lives of the disciples. Apart from the vine they can do nothing. As Barron observes, "Jesus says that he *remains* with the Father, drawing his being from him, and he promises that he and the Father will *remain* with believers, feeding and nurturing them."<sup>3</sup>

In chapter 17, Jesus prays for his disciples. In so doing he summarizes the character of his relationship with them. They know and believe that Jesus was sent from God, and they have accepted and obeyed his words, which have come from God. His concern for them as they remain in a hostile world appears prominently in his prayer. Jesus, the man of heaven made flesh and sent into the world, is returning to the realm of spirit. He leaves the disciples behind and sends them into the world. They no longer belong to the world nor are they of it, for God has called them out of the world and given them to Jesus, but they still live in the world as people of flesh, sent into a world of flesh.

Thus, Jesus prays for his own who are in the world, not that they be taken out of it, but that they be protected from the evil one. Against this backdrop of evil and danger, he draws them into the fellowship of divine oneness, as a place of safety—a dwelling place. And he prays that they might be filled with his joy and calls on God to make them a holy people, sanctified by the word of truth. Thus, the place where God

2. Robert Barron, *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002) 16.

3. *Ibid.*

dwells is the place where they dwell. Within the intimate and sanctified presence of God the disciples of Jesus dwell secure while living in a hostile world.

As we think about the implications for ministry, the horizon of Jesus' prayer for his disciples extends to include those who are yet to believe, and the prayer for them is also for oneness that is realized in fellowship with God. It is unity achieved through the mutual abiding that comes from the Father through Jesus to all believers. There is a vertical and horizontal dimension to this mutual indwelling. Its most concrete character is the love that is shared from the Father to the Son and then to the disciples, but it is also manifest in the love that the disciples share with one another. Jesus states, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (13.34). Jesus' teaching concerning the one flock and one shepherd (10.1-21), the true vine and the branches (15.1-17), and the love the disciples are to have for one another (13.31-34, 15.12) makes clear that oneness in the Gospel of John is reflected in a community of love that is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and abides in the divine presence of the Father through the Son. It is also realized among those who partake of the body and blood of Jesus. Jesus affirms, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (6.56). This is the place where God dwells. He dwells in a community that resides in the world but stands separate from it.

### COME AND SEE

The invitation of the Gospel is to come and see the place where God dwells. Ultimately, that dwelling place is the Word made flesh who comes to reside in the community of believers through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the invitation to come and see leads us to discover the pre-existent Christ in human flesh who invites us to eat of his flesh and drink of his blood that we might share in the divine fellowship of heaven. As Jesus extends the invitation on the shores of the Jordan, we then hear Philip extend that same invitation to Nathaniel, "Come and see" whether anything good can come out of Nazareth. We hear the same invitation extended by the Samaritan woman who evangelizes her village and says, "Come and see a man who told me everything about myself. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Placed on the lips of those who saw Jesus, the invitation becomes a conduit for ministry that invites us to "behold the Lamb of God."

Jesus has come that we might see the Father. John says, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (1.18). Philip wants to see the Father, to which Jesus says, "If you have seen me you have seen the Father" (14.9). Thus, Jesus says, come, follow me, and you will not only see the place where God dwells, you will see God. And so, as readers we follow the Word made flesh as he walks among us by a river side, attends our marriage feasts, rests beside our wells, heals our diseases, weeps at the gravesides of our loved ones, and washes our feet, and we see that truly God has come among us—has moved into the neighborhood.

But, there is also an interesting reversal of this theme in John's Gospel. As Jesus comes to share with us the life of God, he also experiences life in the flesh—our life, our flesh. When Lazarus dies, Jesus makes his way to Bethany. Upon arriving he asks Mary and Martha, "Where have you laid him?" Their response is, "Lord, come and see" (11.34). In his book, *Doing the Truth in Love*, Michael J. Himes makes the connection, "The balance is pointed: the Lord of life invites us to come and see where he dwells and shows us the fullness of life; we invite the Lord to come and see where we dwell and take him to the tomb. He shows us the glory of God, and we show him what it is like to be a creature. And he chooses to be one, even to death, even to death on a cross."<sup>4</sup>

### FOR WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING?

Let us return to the first question that Jesus asked the disciples. "What are you looking for?" We have made a journey through the Gospel observing those who would be followers of Jesus. Often they were looking

4. Michael J. Himes, *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about God, Relationships and Service* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995) 29.

for those things necessary to sustain life in the flesh: bread, water, healing, rest, light. But as Jesus reveals himself as the giver and sustainer of life a new question emerges. In chapter 20 we stand beside Mary Magdalene as she weeps before an empty tomb. Through her tears she sees someone she presumes is the gardener. As we look closer we see the risen Lord and hear him speak to Mary. He asks a question. The question in the garden is similar to, but different from, the question on the banks of the Jordan. Jesus is no longer asking what we are looking for. In the garden he asks, "*For whom are you looking?*" This is the ultimate question for ministry. Upon the revelation of the risen Christ standing before her, Mary goes forth from the garden proclaiming good news, "I have seen the Lord" (20.18).

If we want to see God, to behold his glory, to know and receive his life—if he is our desire, then the question is not *what* are you looking for, because such cannot be found in things that are perishing. If our desire is to know God and be where he is, then we must ask for *whom* are you looking, because life and fellowship with God are found in a person, Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh, who invites us to come and see the place where God dwells.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

The question, "What are you looking for?" is a question for ministry. It marks the beginning of Jesus' own ministry in John's Gospel. As we read the Gospel we move from the realities of flesh to the deeper realities of Spirit. It is the way of incarnation. The Word made flesh touches the ordinary and everyday realities of flesh and transforms them into a vision of glory. The incarnate Son of God seeks and finds us that we might partake of his glory. Thus, ministry is about seeking and finding. We open the door by asking, "What are you looking for," but the journey of faith leads to the discovery that we are seeking a person—Jesus of Nazareth, and we ask, "Where are you staying?"

The quest for Jesus and his abode leads us to a place of mutual indwelling, in which we find the life that sustains and empowers us. Barron observes that "...we see that the form of Christian discipleship is not primarily listening or learning, but rather moving into the 'house' of Jesus, discerning his mode of life, being with him at close quarters."<sup>5</sup> This is the place from which we do ministry. It is that abiding place in the presence of God that protects us from the world as we are sent into it. It is also that place to which we invite others, as we say, "Come and see."

Through the invitation to come and see we are invited to participate in the mission of God. We enter into the task of seeking and finding. We also discover our own finitude as we, like Mary and Martha, invite Jesus to see the place where we dwell. Such recognition places the source and the power of ministry in the transcendent reality of life that does not end in the grave. As partakers of the life of God we go forth from the garden and the empty tomb and proclaim to others, "I have seen the Lord," "Come and see."

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5. Barron, 17.