

Last week we heard about the baptism of Jesus, and the message from God that only John could see and hear. This week we picked up the story after Jesus returned from his time in the wilderness. And now that Jesus was back, John wanted to tell anyone who would listen to him that this was the Messiah.

In a way, this was the moment when Jesus decided to step into his role and begin his work. After his baptism, he was still unknown. Now he had survived his encounter with temptation in the wilderness. That was not definitely a pleasant experience, and it was only a taste of how hard it was going to be. He could still choose the easy path and stay unknown; forget the whole thing and just go home. As yet, only John knew who he was. And perhaps, when Jesus went off into the wilderness, even John wasn't entirely sure that he would come back.

But Jesus did come back. And John was excited to see him. He wanted to share his news with everyone. You have to admire John's dedication. He had no idea what was ahead, but he believed God's promise that there would be a Messiah, and he believed that it was his job to prepare the way. So he did.

John told his news to as many people as he could, but not everyone was listening to him. Some might hear without listening. Others might hear the words but not the message. Others might hear the message, but choose not to do anything about it. And many just thought he was just crazy. But he did it anyway.

John wasn't going to live long enough to see much of what Jesus would do. He wasn't even going to live long enough to see the results of his own work – but he did it anyway. He must have been discouraged sometimes, down-hearted at seeing, perhaps, more failures than successes. But he kept on doing it anyway.

The gospel says that two of John's disciples "heard" what he was saying, but the Greek uses two different verbs. Both of them translate into English as "hear", but they aren't the same. One means 'hear and understand' and the other means 'hear and follow.' Using both verbs stresses that these disciples didn't just hear what he said: they heard, they understood, and they followed.

But at this point the work hadn't started. This was before anyone knew anything about Jesus, or anything about what following him would mean. At this point, "following" didn't involve anything more complicated than just trailing after him. They didn't even say anything. Maybe they had no idea what to say.

What do you say to the Messiah? How do you strike up such a conversation? Perhaps they were nudging one another, each trying to get the other to say something ... to find the right words to open this conversation. But they didn't need to find the right words. They didn't have to find the right way to start the conversation with Jesus. Once they were following him, he did the rest.

It says that Jesus "turned" and the word used for "turn" means to stop and turn around completely. Jesus didn't just glance back; he didn't just look over his shoulder; he stopped and he turned around to face them: not because they had found the right words to open the conversation; not because they knew what to say. He turned to them just because they were following him.

He turned to give them his full attention, and while they were still fishing for words, he spoke to them. He didn't ask them what they thought they were doing. He didn't tell them to hurry up and decide whether they were with him or not. He didn't give them a quick quiz to see how much they had learned from what John had been teaching them. Instead, he asked them "What are you looking for?"

“What are you looking for?” That’s an odd question, isn’t it? You might have expected “What do you want?” But this doesn’t seem to be a story about what people want. Yet again something is lost in translation. One particular Greek word is used five times in this short reading: it’s translated as “staying” in a couple of places and as “remaining” in a couple of other places. Twice John says the Spirit came to Jesus and *stayed*. The disciples asked Jesus where he was *staying*, and then they *stayed* with him that day.

This is not a story about looking for information, or having the right answers to questions. This is a story about finding a place to stay; a place to belong; a place in which to search for the meaning in life; a home for the soul.

We all know the joke about the man who lost his watch in a dark street and asked a friend to help him search for it. After searching under a streetlight for some time with no luck, the friend said “Are you sure you dropped it here?” His friend replied, “No. I dropped it over there, but it’s too dark to search for it over there!”

As long as there have been people, we have always been looking for that place to stay; that place to belong; that place in which to search for the meaning in life. That home for the soul. And there have always been streetlights – those distracting glows that entice us to look in the wrong places, just because they seem like much easier places to look.

The irony is that we have always known that we won’t find a home for the soul under any of the world’s streetlights, and the longer we look there, the more we know this. As Isaiah told us in the first reading: “I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.”

When the disciples decided to follow, before they had any idea what to say or where to begin, Jesus said to them, “Come and see.”

“Come and see.” “Come and stay with me, and you will see.” Discipleship doesn’t start with knowing the right words or the right answers. It starts with turning to God, and letting God do the rest. John didn’t know the answers. These two disciples didn’t know what to say. But they followed anyway.

And did you notice what happened to Peter in the last sentence? This was the very first time Jesus and Peter met, and before anything else passed between them, Jesus gave Peter a new name. The new name had nothing to do with anything Peter had already done. It had nothing to do with the many failures and shortcomings that were ahead of him as a disciple. Peter’s new name described the best of what he could become in the service of God.

Discipleship is not about finding the right words and knowing the right answers. It’s not about always being successful, or always seeing good results. It’s about following and searching with an open heart and open mind; it’s about keeping faith and letting God show you what you can become.

Amen.