

Finding the One Who Ranks Ahead and Was Before John 1:29-42; Isaiah 49:1-7

Isaiah 49:1-7

¹Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. ²He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. ³And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

⁴But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God." ⁵And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength— ⁶he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

⁷Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

John 1:29-41

²⁹The next day John the Baptizer saw Jesus coming toward him and declared:

"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'

³¹*I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.*”

³²And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

³³*I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’*

³⁴*And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.*”

³⁵The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!”

³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “*What are you looking for?*”

They said to him, “Rabbi” (Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹He said to them, “Come and see.”

They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.

⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah.”

The Sermon

When you bow your head, or close your eyes, or put your hands together, or look up at the sky in prayer, what are you looking for?

When you come to church,

When you whisper a prayer at the stoplight,

When you open your Bible to read,

When you sit down with someone you identify as a spiritually enlightening person,

What are you looking for at that moment? What are your hopes? What are your expectations?

I don't remember the first time I was aware of my parents or my older siblings, or my surviving grandparents or most of my aunts, uncles and cousins. Or my own self. By the time I was aware of anything, I was already aware of them.

I also don't remember the first time I heard the name Jesus, or the first story I heard about him, or the first time I pictured him. I don't remember a time when I first saw a Bible or was introduced to the concept of church.

I am one of the most fortunate people in the world. It was easier than easy for me; I didn't have to be introduced to it.

Not everyone is so fortunate. Ten years ago, I spent a week at a Trappist monastery in South Carolina called Mepkin Abbey. It was late afternoon when I got there, and another guest was just arriving as I was moving into my quarters.

His name was Jim, and he was a working man from the Midwest. He reminded me so much of the Irish Catholics whom I had known from around Chicago that I just kind of assumed. But as I learned in the few times that week when silence was not being kept, Jim was actually a prime example of a seeker.

I don't know if it was a quest for truth, or a search for the religious life that would match the faith and belief that were already natural to him, but he was no more or less Christian than he was (and wasn't) Hindu, Baha'i, Sikh, Shiite Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Ashkenazi Jew, Sephardic Jew, Mizrahi Jew, or any other religious identification.

He did confide in me that he had a particular problem with Christianity.

It was some aspect of teaching or practice that I can't remember now, but it was obviously something he had picked up somewhere along the line from somebody who had a fairly strict sense of what a Christian needs to be and think and do.

Whatever it was, there was obviously a world of assumptions between what Jim had heard about what it means to follow Jesus, and what you or I might feel led to believe by an honest reading of the Bible, or through the lens of our tradition.

It was frustrating to Jim, and it became painfully clear to me, that if someone is asking about Jesus—what it takes to be a disciple, what it means to be a Christian, what a Christian believes about Jesus and God and the world—the answer depends to a great extent on whom they ask.

Jim was clearly frustrated, and my attempts to ease his frustration by kind of going Unitarian/Presbyterian on him—"different churches and Christians believe different things"—that didn't help one bit.

This guy was a technician: a plumber, or an electrician, or a mechanic or a steam valve operator or something: in his life's work, problems had solutions.

But I couldn't lie and say, "Well, Jim, you're lucky you found me, because I alone have discerned the truth of the mind of God, so listen to me."

He was faithful; he went to all of the daily services, starting with the one at 3:20 in the morning, and he observed all the silences.

I didn't realize how often, and how fondly or with how much gratitude, I would think about him for the rest of my life. I never got his last name; I can barely even picture him anymore.

But Jim gave me a real-world opportunity to consider: If someone asks you who and what Jesus is, and there's a very limited time to offer a response, what do you say?

It's interesting enough to consider that question by itself, without any context. But the complicating truth is: there is always a context in which, and from which, that question is asked.

And I've always had to wonder: what was Jim looking for?

Four lines particularly stand out to me in John's verses about Jesus coming to John the Baptist, the first three spoken by John the Baptist, the fourth spoken by Jesus.

In verses 31, 33, 34 and 38, John says as a public declaration:

I myself did not know him.

I myself did not know him.

And I myself have seen.

And Jesus says: What are you looking for?

On Christmas morning, the child walks into the room where the stockings are hung.

What are your expectations? What are your hopes? What are you looking for?

The young couple at the front of the sanctuary exchange rings, as well as looks that are both knowing and wondering; they know more about their own closeness to each other than anyone else, and they wonder what's ahead on the long journey they are just beginning together.

You realize that the familiar looking person ten feet away from you in the bookstore is the celebrity whom you have admired for decades, and as you struggle with whether to say anything or not, they glance over at you and notice that you see them. Your mind races to think of what to say, and you can feel your mouth opening to form the first word.

You come to a place you haven't seen since childhood but have seen in your dreams for decades—the house or the school or the church building—and you've been invited to come on it and take a look around, now that you're old enough to have put away the painful memories and sentimental enough to think nostalgically about the good ones. You put your hand on the unlocked door and give it a little push.

What are your expectations? What are your hopes?

What are you looking for?

You open the envelope from the IRS or the utility bill with a conspicuous section of red ink visible through the address window.

Or your cell phone rings, and you recognize it as the number of the person with whom you've recently been at odds, and you really could do without this phone call today, right now, but you tap the button to take the call, and lift the phone to your ear.

Or the surgeon emerges from the operating room to give you an update.

What do you most need at that moment? What are you looking for?

And did you know that in every instance, God is already at work?

Did you know that John the Baptist saw his life's mission as testifying to the light, and that Jesus was the light?

And that God is love, and that Jesus was the embodiment of God's love, and what he did—teaching, healing, feeding, rescuing, clarifying, challenging every conventional wisdom that did not have love at its core—not only showed us how much God loves us, but taught and commanded us to show and to *know* God's love in everything we do and say and stand for.

Isaiah prophesied to the People of God when they needed it most:

scattered and lost and paying the price for how they had let their noblest origins devolve into taking advantage of poor and powerless people and not listening to what God had already said about how we are supposed to treat people—we, individually, and we as peoples and nations.

They've suffered the consequences of their selfishness and apathy and heartlessness, and now they are broken and scattered, and hope and expectation barely have a pulse.

And now God has sent Isaiah to bring a new word to the people. They have broken faith with the covenant, but the covenant relationship has not been lost.

God will rescue God's chosen people, the people of Israel.

But God is love. And it's not enough for this just to be about the Covenant People, this one group among all the peoples of the world.

"And now," according to Isaiah, "the LORD says:

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations (the Hebrew word is *goyim*—I will give you as a light to all the *peoples* of the world), that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

It is too light a thing that you should be God's servant just for you and your own people.

Family salvation is not enough.

One people's salvation is not enough.

The salvation of one race or ethnicity is thinking way too limitedly and small.

Denominational salvation is not enough.

National salvation is not enough.

Exclusive salvation, that leaves some people out by design, is not nearly enough to reflect the God who is love.

God's people are called to be a light to the whole world: Everyone. Everything. Everywhere. Even in your house. Even in your heart.

This is the God who sent the only Son to live and die and live again, and to embody and exemplify what God's love is, and what it means.

Psalm 24:10 asked, "Who is this King of glory?"

Song of Songs (6:10) asked:

"Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners?"

Isaiah 63:1 asked:

"Who is this so splendidly robed, marching in his great might?"

"It is I, announcing vindication, mighty to save."

Jeremiah 46.7 asked:

Who is this, rising like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge?

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" (Matthew 21:10).

The people at the table with Jesus at Simon the Pharisee's house asked among themselves: "Who is this who even forgives sins?" (Luke 7:49).

King Herod said,

"I beheaded John the Baptist; but now who is this other person about whom I hear such things?" (Luke 9:9).

In Jerusalem, Jesus said,

"When I am lifted up from the earth,
I will draw all people to myself."

And the crowd said,

"Who is this Son of Man?" (John 12:32, 34)

Our hopes and expectations define the lens through which we encounter Jesus.

Our expectations are confounded, and our wildest hopes are exceeded.

What are your expectations, what are your hopes, when John the Baptist says,

“I myself did not know him.”

“I myself did not know him.”

“And I myself have seen;”

And Jesus comes to you where you are and asks:

“What are you looking for? Come and see.”

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
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