

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, Christ the light of the world and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

It's so good to be back with you all! The past two weeks teaching were incredibly rich, and I am going to be processing all that was said and experienced for a few more weeks. I am deeply grateful I can be your priest and a professor at Vancouver School of Theology too! I confess it was challenging to shift gears to write a sermon based on the readings this week rather than trauma in the psalms.

But with my teaching hat still on, I'll ask, did you notice the differences in John's Gospel compared to Matthew's last Sunday? All three synoptic gospels give a detailed eyewitness account of John baptising Jesus. But we don't get this in John's Gospel. Matthew's gospel reads.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt 3:13–17)

In the Gospel of John, we read:

The next day he (John the Baptizer) saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the

world! ³⁰ This 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.” ³² And 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. (John 1:29–42)

So lots of the same stuff, but different too. The one line which always puzzles me is “I myself did not know him.” Now that makes no sense because we know that John the Baptizer was the cousin of Jesus. So here’s some historical context which helps with this. The Gospel of Matthew was likely written between 50 and 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and John another 10 to 20 years after that. And there were still some disciples of John the Baptizer around and there was some, shall we say, competition between the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is the more important one and John goes one step further by even minimizing the relationship between them.

This difference between the two Gospels continues in the rest of our reading. The calling of the first disciples. In Matthew, which we will hear next week, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew are fishing in the sea of Galilee when Jesus calls them. In John’s Gospel, they are disciples of John the Baptizer and encounter Jesus when he comes to be baptized in the Jordan River down by Jericho. Scholars are divided on how to understand this. Some try really hard to make them both work, which just hurts my brain. Others look to the theological motivation for each book. Matthew is emphasizing the call and obedience of Simon and Andrew, while in

John, Jesus is revealed through testimony and through the recognition that comes from seeing and knowing him in relationship. I tend to agree with the latter. This seems like a good time to offer a quote often attributed to Joseph Campbell but has been around for much longer. “Everything in the Bible is true and some of it even happened.” This sums up my approach to scripture. I don’t take it literally, but I take it very seriously! So let’s turn to the rest of the story in our reading this morning where we hear the first words spoken by Jesus in this Gospel of John.

When Jesus saw that Simon and Andrew had left John and were now trailing after him — following him — he asks, “What are you looking for?” Or, more precisely, “What are you seeking?” To “look for” something can be casual, even accidental. But to “**seek**” is to move toward something with intention. Seeking implies desire. Longing. Hunger. It suggests that something has already stirred within us — something restless, unfinished, hopeful — and has drawn us into motion. Jesus’ first words invite self-examination. Not judgment, but awareness. What is it that has brought you this far? What do you think you want? What are you hoping to find? And notice this: Jesus does not ask this question only of the first disciples. He asks it of every reader of this Gospel. Of us. Of anyone who follows, even tentatively, even uncertainly.

The two disciples do not answer him directly. Instead, in good rabbinic fashion, they respond with another question: “Rabbi—teacher, where are you staying?” That translation can sound oddly flat, as though they were asking for directions. But the word John uses here carries far more weight. It is the same word Jesus will later use when he says, “**Abide** in me as I abide in you.”

They are asking something much deeper: Where do you dwell? Where do you make your home? Where do you remain? Where is it possible to stay with you — not just briefly, but truly? This is not curiosity. It is longing for belonging.

And typically, Jesus does not answer directly, he does not give them information. Instead, he gives them an invitation: “Come and see.” These are simple words — and deliberately so. There is no explanation, no guarantee, no roadmap. Just an invitation into relationship. Jesus does not invite agreement. He invites presence. He does not demand understanding. He invites relationship.

And John tells us what happens next: “They came and saw where he was staying, and they **remained** with him.” That word “remain” to abide is the word that will shape the entire Gospel of John. Discipleship in John is not first about certainty, correctness, or clarity. It is about staying. Dwelling. Abiding. Choosing to remain in relationship long enough to be **changed** by it. They come. They see. They remain. They are transformed.

That movement — seeking, abiding, bearing witness — echoes through all our readings today. Isaiah gives voice to a calling that begins before awareness: “The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.” This is not the language of fate. It is the language of intimacy. To be named is to be known. To be claimed. To be held in relationship before accomplishment, before failure, before usefulness.

And yet Isaiah is also honest enough to speak of discouragement. “I have labored in vain,” he says. Being chosen does not mean being spared disappointment. It does not mean that every effort will feel successful or every

season will make sense. It means that God's calling is deeper than our sense of effectiveness.

Psalm 40 picks up this same truth from the ground level of lived experience. "I waited patiently for the Lord," the psalmist says — though the Hebrew suggests not passive waiting but hoping and hoping. **Longing** that stretches over time. Faith that persists even when nothing seems to be happening. And then God acts. The psalmist is drawn up from the pit, from the mud, from the place where footing is uncertain. And what follows is a response of availability: "Here I am." That phrase — "Here I am" — is a small phrase with enormous weight in Scripture. It is not a declaration of competence or readiness. It is a posture of openness. In Hebrew, it means: I am present. I am listening. I am open. And then the psalmist says something extraordinary: "Your law is within my heart." This is not about external rule or imposed obligation. It is about internalized relationship. God's will is not forced upon the psalmist; it is written into desire. Faithfulness grows not from fear, but from love.

Later in the psalm, we hear a pairing of two words that appear again and again throughout Scripture: steadfast love and faithfulness. These are covenant words. They describe who God is, not just what God does. The first word, often translated "steadfast love," is *hesed*. *Hesed* is not primarily an emotion. It is loyal, committed love. Love that acts. Love that stays. Love that keeps promises even when the other party falters. *Hesed* is relational and enduring. It is love that binds God to God's people. It is in New Testament terms, Agape love.

The second word, "faithfulness," is *emet*. It comes from a root meaning firm, reliable, trustworthy, true. It is less about abstract truth and more about

dependability. God is someone you can lean your weight on. Together, *hesed* and *emet* form a covenantal pair: love that stays, and faithfulness that holds. So when the psalmist prays, “Let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe,” they are not asking for protection from afar. They are asking for God’s very character to be their shelter. This is faith grounded not in certainty, but in relationship.

Paul echoes this same theology when he writes his opening blessing to the church in Corinth. It is easy to miss just how radical these words are, because they sound so warm and generous. But as I mentioned earlier, context matters. Paul is writing to a community that is already struggling — struggling with conflict, division, competition, and insecurity. Before Paul corrects anything, before he addresses what is broken, he begins with gratitude. “I give thanks to my God always for you,” he says, “because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Cor 1:4)

Grace comes first. Always. The word Paul uses for grace is *charis*, and it does not mean a reward. It is not something earned. It is not something given after people get it right. Charis is gift — freely bestowed, undeserved, and already present. Paul does not say, “I give thanks because you are faithful.” He says, “I give thanks because God has **already** given you grace.” We live in a world that constantly measures value — productivity, visibility, effectiveness, relevance. Paul begins somewhere else entirely. He begins by naming what is already true: grace has been given. Before growth. Before agreement. Before resolution. Grace precedes everything else.

Paul goes on to say something even more surprising: “In every way you have been enriched in him.” (v. 5) The word he uses here literally means made rich. And that is a bold thing to say to a community that is fractured and anxious about who matters most. Their richness is not material wealth, nor moral achievement. It is God’s generosity already at work among them. This guards us from a subtle but dangerous misunderstanding of what it means to be chosen. Being chosen does not mean being perfect. It does not mean being spared struggle. It means being gifted — gifted with grace that is already present, already active, even before it is fully recognized.

Paul continues: “You are not lacking in any gift.” (v. 7) Again, notice what Paul does not say. He does not say that each individual has everything they need. He says together you lack nothing. This is communal language. Plural language. Covenant language. Paul is reminding the Corinthians — and us — that faith is not a solo endeavor. No one person carries all the wisdom, all the insight, all the strength, all the faith. We need one another. And when we are disconnected from community, there are gifts we miss — gifts God intended us to receive through one another. This is especially important in a time when it is easy to withdraw, to isolate, or to imagine that faith is something we have to manage on our own. Paul insists that God’s generosity is distributed across the community. Together, we are enriched. Together, we are sustained. Faith is not something we carry alone. It is something we borrow from one another when our own feels thin.

And Paul grounds all of this — grace, giftedness, calling — in one final assurance: “God is faithful.” (v. 9) The word Paul uses here means reliable, trustworthy, worthy of confidence. This is the New Testament echo of the psalmist’s language — of steadfast love and faithfulness, *hesed* and *emet*. Love that

stays. Faithfulness that holds. So when Paul says, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership of his Son,” he is reminding the Corinthians that everything rests not on their consistency, but on God’s. Not on their unity, but on God’s faithfulness to them. To be called, in Paul’s understanding, is not simply to be invited. It is to be claimed. The initiative belongs to God. Relationship comes before responsibility.

This is good news for a community that is still becoming what God is calling it to be. We are not asked to be perfect. We are asked to remain. To stay in relationship. To keep seeking. To trust that grace is already at work among us — even when we feel uncertain, even when we disagree, even when we are tired.

Paul’s opening words are not naïve optimism. They are deep theological realism. God **is** faithful. And because God is faithful, we can risk being honest, open, and committed to one another. This is how a beloved community grows — not by having all the answers, but by trusting the One who holds us.

So let me ask you: when you came here today, what were you seeking? We come because we have found something here — hope, sustenance, community, a glimpse of God’s *hesed* steadfast and faithful love. And when we find it, the call is not to hoard it, but to say to others, “Come and see.”

Jesus still asks the question and offers the invitation into relationship. Are we willing to say like the psalmist “Here I am”?