

Epiphany 2A

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I remember having to take a required anthropology class from a well-meaning lunatic when I was in college. I don't remember much of the class, but I do remember that we had to read about the earliest humans and their burial rites. I clicked into the subject matter, and I found the topic of burial practices fascinating and even a bit moving—which would bode well for my future career.

Apparently, scientists fight quite a bit about when humans or proto-humans first began to bury their dead and then when they started to ritualize their burials with bits of shell, or beads, or weapons—anything that was important to the person in life or something that might ease their way into the afterlife. The consensus is that this practice was common at least 12,000 years before the birth of Christ, with some scientists dating it even earlier.

Regardless of the precise date, it is safe to say that humans have been creating rituals around death since our pre-history. Which invites the question from both young Ian and middle-aged Ian: why. What are we seeking?

Fr. Sam, Rev. Chana, and I were all in my office this week having a conversation about what brings people to church at St. Chrysostom's. We didn't land on any one thing. We have members who find their meaning serving on the finance committee. We have members who find their meaning listening to our choir. We have members who find their meaning while on their knees at the altar. We have members who find their meaning in fellowship, in service, at coffee hour, in the garden. It's a remarkably diverse group.

But my intuition tells me that, no matter how a person is involved here in church, everyone is seeking something sublime, something awesome, something divine—just like the earliest humans with their shells and beads and offerings of fruit and grain. The world may be a lot different than it was, but I think our needs for the transcendent are precisely the same as they ever were.

Which is what Jesus asks the two disciples who were following him in today's Gospel. John the Baptist is doing what he does best—pointing to Jesus as the fulfilment of all the prophecy in the scriptures and as the very Son of God on whose shoulders the Holy Spirit has descended at baptism. John urges his disciples to follow Jesus, who is the true expression of God's love here on earth. And they do. And the first thing that Jesus asks them is “what are you looking for?”

It's a provocative question, and I think it's one that every Christian will need to ask herself in every season of life. And, actually, I think the question is even more germane at this moment in time than it was a generation ago. Our parents and grandparents often attended church out of a sense of duty and even a societal obligation. Most of those obligations are gone now, and non-attendance is becoming the norm. So, for those of us who do come, what are we looking for?

The church has a pretty heady answer. The church would say that we are looking for union with God. And while, of course, that is true, it can't be the only reason. One of the times when I felt God's presence most closely in my whole life was on the side of a misty mountain a hundred miles from the nearest church. Union with God is not the exclusive province of the Episcopal Church. So, it cannot just be that.

And as I was thinking about this question, "what are you looking for?" It occurred to me that there are probably two answers—the generic and the specific. The generic answer is kind of the Sunday School answer. We are looking for Jesus. That's what the disciples in the story were looking for. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The Son of God. The Messiah. The Rabbi. In whatever way, shape, or form we find Jesus, he is the answer to the question "what are we looking for?" The church teaches that truth can be found in many different

places but that the perfect truth is always found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That is all true and good and proper and theologically correct.

For me, though, it's also incomplete. The specific answer to "what are you looking for" isn't one that I can give you. It's one that is the core of your spiritual journey and part of what you need to ask yourself, hopefully with others that you trust and love, as you mature in faith. I can tell you about my specific answer, but I can't speak for you. It is work you will have to do on your own, with the help of this community.

Maybe you can relate, but I think that I am on a many decades' quest for divine stillness. I like nothing better than, when I am on vacation, to find the nearest Anglican church and slip into their midweek service. No music. No sermon even. Just the quiet of a big, usually kind of cold, cathedral with 4 or 5 other worshippers who have come into the great silence to be with God for a few minutes. I talk fast. I walk fast. I think fast. I type fast. And for me, I search for a God who is able to come to me in the still small voice. I seek the God who exists in the space between the minutes and who dances in the play of the light of the stained glass.

Your results may vary. Your specific answer to the question "what are you looking for?" may be in the constant struggle for divine justice in a world that

seems to set on marginalizing the vulnerable. Maybe you'll find Jesus out in the streets. Your answer may be in the great art of the church—the music, the literature, the sculpture, the icons. Your answer may be on the finance committee, maybe in the kitchen, may be in the men's or women's group. I really have no idea.

But I know that the promises of the church are true. If you seek here, you will find. We have been looking for God for countless millennia, and I can say with great confidence that God is right here, waiting for you to discover in the person of Jesus, yes, but in countless other ways as well—each of them a divine gift from a loving God. Amen.