

The Rev. Kerith Harding's Sermon – “Spiritual Island Fever” January 20 2020

“What are you looking for?”

These five words are among the most powerful in all of scripture. They draw us in, invite us — each of us, personally — into relationship with God. It is important to reflect on them: to consider who it is asking them, and ultimately, to answer him.

“What are you looking for?”

First of all, let's reflect simply on the fact that we have a God who asks us questions like this. Christianity is not primarily about our behaviors and “doing the right thing,” or “being good,” as many of us were taught as kids. We don't have a God who “has better things to do than worry about me,” as I hear people so often say. Quite the opposite: We have a God who has *nothing* better to do than show up for each of us and draw us into relationship. We have a God - in Jesus - who asks us a deeply personal question: “What are you looking for?” We have a God who wants to know our answer, who knows it before we speak it, and yet who also knows that as humans, *we need to say certain things out loud in order fully to understand ourselves*. That by answering this question, we are not merely reporting back to Jesus what we are looking for; by answering him, we are *discovering* what we are looking for. The encounter, the question, illuminates something inside of us. We are hearing ourselves, perhaps, for the first time. We are listening to the deepest part of ourselves, letting that soft small voice speak.

Sometimes, in prayer, our answer is spontaneous. Our heart has been waiting to be asked, is eager to tell Jesus. *Peace*, we might say. *Relief from my burden*. *Good health*. Or maybe we are more like the disciples: *Where are you staying? I just want you*.

Other times, our answer rises to the surface more slowly. **Sometimes**, we have buried it so deeply, we can't find it. We have moved off the trail so much, we've lost our sense of direction. It feels like the walls have closed in. We are restless but we can't seem to answer it; we are thirsty for something but we can't seem to quench our own thirst. This is what I call *spiritual island fever*.

This past week on Maui was tough for a lot of people because of the constant rain and overcast skies. It felt like the walls had closed in. Maui does not have a lot of things to do indoors, and if you have small kids with energy, relaxing at home by the fire is not a viable, longterm option. Likewise for those of you who need your surfing time or your cycling time or your walking or gardening time or who just like sunshine. It was a dreary week. Even our dog Lucy just looked glumly at the weather outside, choosing to stay indoors. One person I spoke to said she drove all around the island one day chasing the sun, just needing to be in its warmth.

Another said she had difficulty getting out of bed every day. Another just said, “Well, this is depressing.” I felt deep compassion for those who move here because they have a form of Seasonal Affective Disorder and knew that their week was probably worse than most people's. We were just waiting for the sun to break through, for light and warmth, for the gorgeous weather we are used to to return.

Sometimes, even when the sun is out, we feel that way about our own lives. We have: *spiritual island fever*. We feel trapped, bound, restless but unable to satisfy it with anything. Something feels off, and we need a door to open somewhere but we don't know where. We feel like we are missing something but we have looked everywhere and we don't really know what we are looking for or where it is. We feel hemmed in, bleak, like we are in need of something new, refreshing and warming. Spiritually, we are waiting for the sun to break through.

This restlessness drives a decent amount of our social problems, unfortunately. If buying new stuff momentarily satisfies our need for something greater in our lives, what happens when the satisfactions wears off is that we think we need more of it. Another vacation, another new car, more cocktails, more exercise. But the spiritual masters all tell us: if what we choose ultimately fails to satisfy, it's not because there wasn't enough of it, it's because it was never meant to fully satisfy us in the first place.

It is here, in these moments that Jesus asks us "What are you looking for?"

No one can answer this question for you. Only you can do that.

His disciples, we are told, "said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" The disciples essentially ask, "Where can I find you? Where should we go? What should we do?" They understand that Jesus will show them something, that they will need to follow him to places unknown, that their restlessness isn't caused by bad weather (or a dearth of upcountry restaurants!), but by something deeper. Each of us as humans are wired to want God, to search for God and to recognize God. It is in our spiritual DNA. And often we are restless because we miss God.

This morning each of us are asked by Jesus, "What are you looking for?" Let your heart answer it, not your head. Let your deepest love answer it, not your anxiety. Let your small, quiet voice answer it, not the one usually pounding in you ears about all you have to do. Really listen to your heart's answer. It may both surprise you and sound utterly familiar all at once.

And when you hear it, know that you have just come home to yourself. You have just opened a door and begun to walk in the direction of the sunlight.

Do not use your head for this journey. Don't even use your eyes. Use your heart.

"Come and see," Jesus invites us. You are not asked to map out a plan; you are invited to follow. You are not in charge; you are to be led. Jesus wants to give more and more of himself to us. And your heart wants nothing more than it wants this.

So as we sit, each of us in different versions and degrees of spiritual island fever, know that showing up here today meant that God has just asked you this beautiful question. *What are you looking for?*

May we be both vulnerable enough and brave enough to answer him. Amen.