

Why We Are Here

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL
BASED ON ISAIAH 49:1-7 AND JOHN 1:29-42
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When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38)

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR? That's what Jesus wanted to know of his first disciples, and I believe it's what he wants to know of us as well. He wants to know our motives. Why are we following Jesus? What are we looking for? Why are we here? And it won't do to say we are here as part of a district pulpit exchange, to give preachers a different audience and to let worshipers experience a different voice. What are we really looking for?

The question is especially poignant – and pointed – following last weekend's shootings of Congresswoman Giffords and the others in Arizona. In such a life as this, in such a world as this, what brings us here? What emptiness, what hunger, what sacred quest brings us to this gathering, in this church building, on this particular day?

For several seasons a few years ago, every time a new Day-Timer catalog arrived in the mail it greeted me with the message, "It's all about you." According to their advertising, the purpose of their entire product line, and of the life style it was meant to support, was the satisfaction of my desires.

While the Day-Timer people were telling me "It's all about you," a little book about an obscure passage in one of the least-read books of the Bible was gaining popularity. *The Prayer of Jabez* was about one short prayer of four requests in which Jabez uses the word "me" or "my" four times. "Bless me," he prays, "extend my lands, be with me, keep me from trouble" (1 Chron. 4:10). It's almost as if God had said, "It's all about you, Jabez."

Isaiah straightens us out. The Day-Timer people were wrong; it's not all about me. And it's not all about you, Jabez. It's not all about us, whoever we are. Our needs, our desires, what we are looking for, may be a good place to start, but they are *only* a start. That may even have been where Isaiah started, focusing his attention perhaps on what he and his people needed from a relationship with God.

They certainly needed a lot as they prepared to reconstruct a nation after a generation of captivity in a foreign land. Their once-vibrant economy was a shambles; their roads and infrastructure had deteriorated from long neglect; their strong social and cultural institutions, which had once unified the nation, had collapsed, leaving neighbor set against neighbor. Sound familiar? It wouldn't be enough simply to patch or repair what was broken. They needed to make a new start.

And that's when Isaiah realized he had set his sights too low. Returning to the past, restoring what had been, was not enough. "I have labored in vain," he lamented, "I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity" (Isa. 49:4a). And in his despair and sense of hopelessness, an idea began to dawn. "Yet surely my cause is with the Lord," he thought, "and my reward with God" (v. 4b). That's when he heard God speak.

And here's what God said to Isaiah. "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" (Isa. 49:6). It's not enough, God said, to satisfy your own hunger and your people's need for a restored and healthy relationship with God. It's not enough to restore the health and vitality of the church. It's not even enough to restore the nation. "I will give you as a light to the nations," God said, "that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

God does not bless us so that we will be blessed; God blesses us *so that* we will be a blessing to others. God heals us *so that* we can heal the world in which we live. God enriches our lives *so that* we can enrich the world around us. That's why we are here.

We are here to be a light to the world. We are here to demonstrate that there is a life-giving alternative to the unsatisfying and destructive way of life the world offers. We are here to bring hope and vitality and wholeness of life to every place where our living in the world takes us. And the grace of it is, as we surrender our concern for our own welfare and give ourselves for the welfare of others, we grow into the maturity that is the aim of life and the glory of God. And we discover that we have found what we are looking for.

It's understandable, and a very human thing, that we should seek protection and safety when congresswomen and judges and nine-year-old girls are gunned down in our streets and markets. What strange and foreign world is this in which we live? Of course we'd want to pray with Jabez, "be with me, keep me from trouble." The message of our faith is that God has us here for something more. "Seek the welfare of the [world] where I have sent you into exile," God says, "and pray . . . on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:7).

Our efforts may not always – or even very often – produce the results we hope to see, and what we do may not often be appreciated. But we do it anyway. "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime," theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said; "therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness."

At a vigil in Tucson last week, our bishop in that area recalled meeting a young boy who told her that a memorial picture he had drawn on a sidewalk had been ruined but that he would make it better. "With a confident smile, and chalk in hand," she said, "we saw him walk with great determination toward the sidewalk of hope. In that moment, that boy made us part of his family, speaking to us as if we had always known each other, and letting us know that things could be made better. It was a word of hope, great hope."

We are here to be God's word of great hope, spoken in the face of hopelessness and darkness. We are here as United Methodists – 12 million strong around the world – as our mission states, "to make disciples of Jesus Christ [the Prince of Peace] for the transformation of the world." Our words will sometimes be lost in the wind; our prayers may seem unanswered; our expressions of hope may be spoiled underfoot. But like that little boy in Tucson, with a confident smile, and chalk in hand, we walk with great determination toward our own sidewalks of hope, to let the world know things can be made better. That is why we are here.

PRAYER — Give us once more, O God, imagination and courage to hope, and let your purpose for us bear the fruit for which you have created us and placed us here.