

Ormond Uniting Church



Sunday, January 18th, 2025
“What are you looking for?”

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Chair of Council: Dr Mardie Townsend

Music: Karen Roberts

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF FIRST PEOPLES

We acknowledge the Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation, who have walked upon and cared for this land for countless generations. We recognize their deep spiritual connection to this place and give thanks for their stewardship of creation. We honor their Elders past and present and pledge ourselves to the ongoing journey of truth-telling, justice, and reconciliation.

GREETING

In scripture we read:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them (1 John 4:16).

May the love of God be here with you now

And also with you

WELCOME

Good morning!

Today we hear a question. The question is posed by the one who John the Baptist calls The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That question is “What are you looking for?”. Far from being a trick or a test, this is God in Christ seeing us, affirming that we are made in the image of God and drawing us into his eternal love and calling us to be a light to all nations.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Join me in this call to worship as we read Psalm 40 responsively
I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.

**He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.**

He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.

**Many will see and fear
and put their trust in the Lord.**

Happy are those who make the Lord their trust,
who do not turn to the proud
or to those who go astray after false gods.

**You have multiplied, O Lord our God,
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;
none can compare with you.**

Were I to proclaim and tell of them,
they would be more than can be counted.

**Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
but you have given us open ears.**

Burnt offering and sin offering

you have not required.

**Then we say, “Here we are;
we delight to do your will, O God;
your law is within our hearts.”**

I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation.

**We have not restrained our lips,
as you know, O Lord.**

We have not hidden your saving help within our hearts.

**We have spoken of your faithfulness and salvation;
we have declared your steadfast love
to the great congregation.**

Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from us.

**Let your steadfast love and faithfulness
keep us safe forever.**

Let us pray:

Most wonderful God, most faithful Friend, please remove from us the rowdy chatter of the world, and open our ears to the still small voice of your Spirit as you witness to the truth of Christ Jesus. Enable us to hear clearly, to understand profoundly, to respond freely, to serve lovingly and to worship delightedly. For your name's sake.

Amen!

HYMN 611 God of grace and God of glory

1 God of grace and God of glory,
on your people pour your power;
now fulfil your Church's story,
bring the bud to glorious flower.

Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

2 See the hosts of evil round us
scorn your Christ, assail his ways.
Fears and doubts too long have bound us;
free our hearts to work and praise.

Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage,
for the living of these days,
for the living of these days.

3 Cure your children's warring madness;
bend our pride to your control;
shame our wanton selfish gladness,
rich in things and poor in soul.

Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage,
lest we miss your kingdom's goal,
lest we miss your kingdom's goal.

4 Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the gift of your salvation
be our glory evermore.

Grant us wisdom,

grant us courage,
serving you whom we adore,
serving you whom we adore.

PRAYER OF ADORATION AND THANKSGIVING

We give you all thanks and praise, O God,
for you alone are the Holy One,
the great redeemer of your people.
From the womb of chaos you pulled a newborn earth.
Even before they were born you called your people by name
to be a light to the nations,
surrounding them with your maternal love
and hiding them from danger.
You have revealed to us your chosen servant
— the one in whom you are glorified —
your child and our Lord, Jesus the Messiah.
When he was killed, you raised him to new life,
and through him you have taken away the sin of the world.
By your grace, all who call on his name
are baptised with your Holy Spirit
and enriched with every spiritual gift
as we await the day when his glory
will be revealed as the light of salvation to all nations.
Therefore, with our hearts lifted high,
we offer you thanks and praise at all times
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

As we come to the prayer of confession I want you all to know that the word for forgiveness in the Greek of the New Testament is “aphesis”.

This literally means “let go” or “release”. It’s the same word for setting a prisoner or a captive free. So when we pray the prayer of confession we’re not wallowing in guilt. We are looking to be honest with ourselves in the presence of God and to let go of what is holding us back from a loving relationship with ourselves and the world. We seek release.

Let us pray

Almighty, All-tender God, our beginning and our ending, you cry out for justice, you bless the peacemakers, you embody the way of true life in Jesus' fierce compassion.

In our society, in the church, and in our lives we have fallen short of your dreamings.

We have confused being loving with being nice.

We have resisted hard conversations, afraid to speak the truth.

We have allowed evil to flourish because it is easier to go with the flow.

We have fallen into the trap of despair.

In silence we bring to you what we yearn to be set free from.

Silence

In Jesus' risen life, the lies of violence are dissolved.

In Jesus' risen life, the chains of fear are broken.

In Jesus risen life, we taste your love that is stronger than hate

Nourish us now by your power

so that we may play our part in your symphony of grace for things.

Amen.

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

"God is love. ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

(1 John 4:16, 18)

Friends, this is Christ's word of grace to every single one of us—
listen: "Your sins are forgiven."
Thanks be to God.

PASSING OF THE PEACE

Christ is our peace. He has reconciled us to God in one body by dying
on the cross and rising to new life.

We meet in his name and share his peace.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

Please share the peace with one another

Before we come to today's readings, I just wanted to let you know that
I have included a slightly different wording to what we usually say
after the bible readings. The reader will say 'For those words of
witness and Christ the Word'. To which you respond 'Thanks be to
God'. The reason I chose this is because I want to emphasise that the
ultimate Word of God is Jesus Christ. When we read in the beginning
of John's gospel "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was
with God and the Word was God," that Word is Jesus. The bible is a
witness to that Word but not the ultimate Word itself. We worship the
Word made flesh.

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Your Word, Oh Lord, is a lamp to our feet;
A light to our path

Isaiah 49:1-7

¹ Listen 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.

² He 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.

³ And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

⁴ But 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."

⁵ And 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—

⁶ he 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."

⁷ Thus 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 1:29-42

²⁹The next day he 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.’ ³¹I 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. ³³I 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.’ ³⁴And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One.”

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” (which translated means 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” (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

For these words of witness and Christ the Word
Thanks be to God

HYMN 215 You servants of God, your Master proclaim

1 You servants of God,
your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad
his wonderful name;
the name all-victorious
of Jesus extol:
his kingdom is glorious,
and rules over all.

2 God rules on high,
almighty to save;
and still he is nigh,
his presence we have;
the great congregation
his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation
to Jesus our King.

3 Salvation to God,
who sits on the throne!
let all cry aloud,
and honour the Son:
the praises of Jesus
the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces,
and worship the Lamb.

4 Then let us adore,
and give him his right,

all glory and power,
all wisdom and might,
and honour and blessing,
with angels above,
and thanks never-ceasing,
and infinite love.

SERMON

May the meditations of our hearts and our minds be always acceptable in your sight, God our strength and our redeemer.

Amen

There's a question at the centre of today's gospel reading. Almost literally in the middle of it.

Two of John's disciples follow Jesus and Jesus asks "What are you looking for?"

What are you looking for?

Jesus is asking you this.

He's asking all of us. But I want you who can hear me now to know that he is asking you "What are you looking for?".

Often in life this question is followed by "I'm looking for my keys."

But not here. Unless we say Christ is the key but let's not get too smart.

The act of "looking for" is everywhere in John's gospel. The Greek word he uses for "looking for" is the same word used for "seeking".

Crowds and disciples constantly seek Jesus.

Jesus seeks to do God's will.

Authorities seek to arrest Jesus.

They also seek to kill him.

What people seek can be a way of knowing the heart of a person.

In today's passage when the disciples address Jesus as Rabbi, which means teacher, they have indicated they seek his wisdom and instruction.

But after addressing him as Rabbi they ask him "Where are you staying?".

Don't you hate it when someone answers a question with a question? What should we have for dinner? What do you feel like? I asked you first.

When someone who is asked what they are looking for, responds with 'Where are you staying?' it sounds strange or like they're avoiding the question. But again, like the word for looking and seeking, the word for staying is everywhere in John's gospel.

It is, in fact, the same word translated as abiding. And it normally describes Jesus' relationship to his followers.

Like when he says "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them".

Or "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

“Where are you abiding Jesus?” probably sounds even stranger. Jesus says to them “Come and See”.

“Come and See”. Not “I’m staying at 367 North Road Ormond”. Nothing that mundane. But nor does he launch into an explanation of what he or his mission is all about. It’s an invitation. “Come and see”.

Coming and seeing in John’s gospel means to believe in him – to show faith in Christ.

Like later when Jesus says “Whoever sees me, sees him who sent me”

and

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.”

That’s why his invitation to come and see in this gospel passage begins the call of his disciples.

So, we might say that in asking Andrew and an unnamed disciple what they seek, he is seeking them – He is seeking them to be his disciples.

In asking what you seek, Jesus is seeking you to be his disciple.

But Jesus’ question is not “What are you going to do for me?” it’s “What are you looking for?”

John the Baptist has an answer to this in our reading, even if it comes before the question.

As he watches Jesus walk by he says “Look!” notice that word. “Look! Here is the Lamb of God!”. And earlier in the passage John tells us that this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Lamb of God is a phrase that we say and sing so often in church that it tends to lose its strangeness. But strange, it is. Where does it come from and what does it mean?

We don't know for certain but it's probably a reference to both a prophecy from Isaiah 53, and the Passover lamb from the Book of Exodus.

Isaiah 53 is one of the so-called servant songs. Who the servant Isaiah was talking about isn't exactly known but early Christians believed this was prophesying Jesus. Isaiah describes a suffering servant who bears the pain, sin, and rejection of humanity. Like a lamb led to slaughter, he accepts this burden silently so that we might be healed and restored. The later apostles would come to see Jesus as carrying the burden of our sins and dying for us on the cross.

But John has a different take on what makes Jesus the lamb of God.

In John's gospel we are told the crucifixion takes place on "the day of preparation for Passover".

We are also told that his bones were not broken so as to "fulfil the scripture". That scripture is from the book of Exodus in which Moses, as part of the Passover ritual, directs the Israelites that none of the lamb's bones shall be broken. So, in John's gospel Jesus is the Passover lamb.

But here's the thing, the Passover lamb in the book of Exodus is not sacrificed to secure the forgiveness of sins. The Passover lamb is used to help God's people, the Hebrews, escape from slavery in Egypt. The lamb's blood marked their homes so that death would not fall on them as they fled oppression and moved toward freedom.

Jesus is not protecting us from the punishment of sin as some kind of sacrifice to appease an angry God. He is liberating us from sin.

One way to think of it is that Jesus is not the lamb for God but the lamb of God. This lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world through death on the cross and resurrection is God's gift of sheer grace. The lamb of God doesn't change God's intentions for us. Jesus doesn't come along and say "Wait up, God. I'll take the punishment for humanity". The lamb of God, at least for John, is the liberator that expresses God's intentions perfectly.

But another way we know that his taking away of sin is not a sacrifice to appease an angry God is that Jesus' mission of liberation from sin begins even before the cross.

When he sits with outcasts and sinners his very presence and love lift their burdens. He declares forgiveness which heals and makes a person whole. His perfect and abundant love is too powerful, eventually, for the oppressive and evil powers of the cosmos.

But in all of this, we still have a choice.

We have a choice about how we live our lives. That's why Jesus asks us "What are you looking for?"

One thing you might find, depending where you look, is a calling. Take the reading from Isaiah we heard before the gospel reading today.

The Lord called me before I was born;
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.

And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

[He] formed me in the womb to be his servant

A lot of people have written a lot of words about who is doing the speaking here. Is it Jacob, who was eventually called Israel? Is it Isaiah himself? Is it Israel the nation? Is it a prophecy of Christ?

But there's one other possibility that might be both the hardest and yet the most exciting of all. Does anyone want to guess who might be the intended speaker of these words?

I'll give you a clue: it's the same person I said is being asked "What are you looking for?"

Yes, we also join the call to service in Isaiah. We are being called to be instruments of his love in the world. And it's not for a chosen few. It's not only for believers or the people we like.

That's why we hear God say in this passage in 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;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

This is remarkable. We are called to participate in the reconciliation of the world to God and the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.

To be a light to the nations is not merely to reflect the light of God's love. It's to also shed light on the places where evil and suffering is happening. God already knows where these places are. It's up to us to be truthful to each other about where they are and respond as Christ would have us respond.

We don't exist merely to love the church but to love the world.

If that sounds like a rather large and maybe even intimidating project, well, I'd like to finish by sharing with you an ancient interpretation of Jesus's question "What are you looking for?".

It comes from the theologian and Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom who lived almost 1700 years ago. His words very much show the importance of human encounter. He writes

by the question [that is, by asking the disciples "What are you looking for?"] He may make them more familiar, and impart to them greater boldness, and show them that they are worthy to hear Him; for it was probable that they would blush and be afraid, as being unknown to him, and as having heard such accounts of Him from the testimony of their teacher. Therefore, to remove all this, their shame and their fear, he questions them and would not let them come all the way to the house in silence.

[When he tells them "Come and See"] Christ does not tell them the marks of His abode, nor its situation, but rather induces them to follow Him by showing them that He had accepted them. For this reason He did not say anything of this kind to them, It is an unseasonable time now for you to enter into the house, tomorrow you shall hear if you have any wish, return home now; but converses with them as with friends, and those who had long been with Him.

How good is that? To encourage someone to follow, be curious about them, give them a voice, accept them, befriend them and by doing so remove their intimidation, shame and fear.

The work of compassion and justice is varied and sometimes hard and complex but in the end there has to be an element of connection.

That's certainly the example of Christ in the gospels who lifted people's burdens through face-to-face encounter.

This is not simply so their souls might be saved. This is so they might hear the call, so beautifully articulated in Isaiah, to be a part of God's Kingdom on earth. It's so they might behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and know the abundant life it makes possible.

That's certainly worth looking for.

Amen

APOSTLES CREED

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand
of God the Father almighty.

From there he will come to judge
the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

HYMN 717 Give thanks with a grateful heart

Give thanks with a grateful heart,
give thanks to the Holy One;
give thanks, because he's given
Jesus Christ, his Son.

Give thanks with a grateful heart,
give thanks to the Holy One;
give thanks, because he's given
Jesus Christ, his Son.

And now let the weak say 'I am strong',
let the poor say 'I am rich',
because of what the Lord has done for us;
and now let the weak say 'I am strong',
let the poor say 'I am rich',
because of what the Lord has done for us.

(Repeat all)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We think of the disciples' question "Where are you staying?"

Father

We pray for those who have no place to stay-

- For those who have lost their homes and means of livelihood in the floods in Queensland
- Those who have lost their homes in the fires in Victoria
- Those who have lost their homes in the earthquake in Afghanistan
- Those who have lost their temporary tent homes in the floods and storms in Gaza
- Those who have fled from their homes because of domestic violence
- Those who live on the streets or couch surf
- Those who have no spiritual home

Where are you staying?

We also pray for your wonderful world, and the creatures and plants

- that have less than ideal places to stay
- that no longer have the climate they need to thrive
- that are impacted by encroaching urban development
- that are impacted by the rubbish created by humans

Where are you staying?

Generous God we recall these words from John's gospel :

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish”

Father you have moved into our neighbourhood. You have pitched your tent amongst us. We have a place to stay, close to you. Help us to show the same generosity to those who are in need.

In Jesus name we pray.

AMEN

THE LORDS PRAYER

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory
are yours, now and forever. Amen

OFFERING

Gracious God, through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus, you have given immeasurable grace to us. May our offerings reflect the grace we have received, and symbolise lives committed to the service of our risen Lord.

Amen.

HYMN 658 Here I am Lord

1 I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard My people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin My hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear My light to them – whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me;
I will hold Your people in my heart.

2 I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne My people's pain.
I have wept for love of them; they turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
Give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak My Word to them – whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me;
I will hold Your people in my heart.

3 I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them; My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide,
Till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give My life to them – whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.

I will go, Lord, if You lead me;
I will hold Your people in my heart.

WORD OF MISSION

Lamb of God, for ever taking away the sin of the world, please visit this congregation with your salvation. Come with your almighty gentleness and lift from us the burden of everything that discourages, bewilders, or makes us anxious. Come with your beauty and draw us into your peace, strength and holy happiness.

Amen!

SENDING OUT

Look on the Lamb of God and be at peace, my friends.

As you go from this sanctuary, do not go as slaves, fearfully obedient to a hard master.

Go as the free children of God, who are loved with a depthless and everlasting love.

Serve God gladly,
serve your neighbour lovingly,
serve your loved ones thankfully,
and serve yourself most kindly.

Amen!

The love of the Holy God surround you,
the love of the Holy Christ redeem you,
and the love of the Holy Spirit indwell you,
now and evermore.

Amen!

DISMISSAL

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord:
In the name of Christ.

Amen.

You can find a copy of today's sermon along with other congregational information on the church website.

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Church Office

Tuesdays, 9.30am-2.30pm

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NEWS & NOTICES