

# 1

## WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

*John 1:38*

It is Socrates who is credited with the maxim, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” In our ever-changing world, so full of complexity and uncertainty, there remains the inclination *not* to examine our lives too closely for too long. Living life without self-reflection seems, perhaps, an easier path to take. We can easily tune in to the voices of our culture, voices that scream at us to conform to the latest fad and, in doing so, set aside any hope of self-examination. Whether it’s the latest message that pops up on our social media feed, the chatter of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, or the chaos of managing a busy household, there are plenty of distractions that keep us from pondering life’s *big questions*.

Aside from the distractions, we have the task of sifting through all those “answers” that are so readily provided for our problems. Other people are quick to assure us that we are on the right path—that is, if it is *their* path. These voices offer simple directions and step-by-step instructions on how to think and how to act: study hard, attend a good college, build your resume, network your way up the corporate ladder, work long hours, be politically correct, never

tolerate intolerance, and then work even harder and put in longer hours. Whew! While there is nothing inherently evil or intrinsically wrong with education, finances, investments, and hard work, is that the road that leads to joy? Is that all there is? Aren't we made for something more?

The examined life takes some work. It requires time. It requires silence. It requires asking those big questions and having a heart, mind, and will open to the answers. *What is my purpose? Why am I here?* The examined life also involves courage. For in asking the big questions and discerning the answers through study, humility, counsel, and receptive hearts and minds, we sometimes find answers we don't really like. We may be called to alter our courses in life, to relinquish control of those ever-perfect plans we've created. We may be called to embrace change, which is never easy for it may involve risk.

The first words out of the mouth of Jesus in the Gospel of John form a question: "What are you looking for?" Jesus poses this question to two disciples of John the Baptist. John observes Jesus walking by and calls out, "Behold, the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:36). That's a strange way to identify someone, yet the title provides insight into who John the Baptist believes Jesus is. John uses language of the Jewish Passover to describe Jesus' ultimate purpose. The two disciples must be intrigued by their master's identification of Jesus as the sacrificial "Lamb of God" because they immediately begin to follow Jesus. John the Baptist has a definite idea of Jesus' identity, and he is not afraid to verbalize it. It is John who points to Jesus, yet these followers must decide for themselves who they believe this man truly is. Often, our journey begins by another person pointing the way, calling something

or someone to our attention, or simply living life in such a way that we aim to emulate. However, we have to personally make that decision to change our lives; it cannot be made for us.

### *What Are You Looking For?*

Jesus poses this rather straightforward question to the two disciples. It is a simple yet complex one for them to consider; it is a simple yet complex one for *us* to consider some two thousand years later. In contemplating the question, we might be able to dive below the surface of our daily routines and seek our heart's true desires.

Having an answer for life's questions is a good thing. Having answers that make sense and connect us to something bigger than ourselves is better. Doing the interior work and arriving at truth in order to find the answer is perhaps the best.

I vividly remember sitting in my Algebra II class in high school and not having a clue what "X" was or how to solve for it. The teacher sat us alphabetically, and by chance, there was a brilliant, Russian foreign exchange student who sat right behind me. Let's just say that on more than one occasion, my head turned a full 180 degrees to "stretch" and cast my eyes upon his answer. That answer was quickly placed in the appropriate blank space on my paper. Unfortunately (or fortunately for me), I had one of those teachers who wanted more than the answer. He demanded that we show the work. *What were the steps that led you to the answer? . . . Show the work!* It was difficult, and it did take more time, but the end result was not only the correct answer but also a sense of accomplishment in knowing that this answer had not come freely.

In responding to our Lord's question, "What are you looking for?" it is appropriate to take some time to reflect on our own circumstances, behaviors, and attitudes. Taking time to analyze our own lives can lead us to think about the risks of our current behaviors and attitudes and begin to articulate what we are indeed seeking in this life. It's also prudent to take a critical view of how we have lived our lives up to this point, for what we believe is important may not be reflected in the decisions and life choices we've made. For example, if we claim that our health is important to us but we never exercise and we spend our days eating junk food, then our desire to be healthy is not reflected in our reality. It is also important to process the innumerable messages that our culture provides on a daily basis, communicating to us in obvious and subtle ways what is important in life. According to our society, being popular, wealthy, and famous as well as fitting in, standing out, and being outrageous provide happiness and purpose in life. While not everything our popular culture sells us is evil, it must all be examined in light of what is true, beautiful, and good. Such analyzing, reflecting, and examining mark a few of the initial steps in doing the work to get to an answer.

In response to the question that Jesus poses to the two disciples, they ask, "Where are you staying?" (Jn 1:38). In today's language, this is equivalent to asking, "May I be your student?" To be a disciple means to be disciplined and devoted, absorbing everything about the one giving instruction. In the pages of the Bible and in Rabbinic commentary, we often find the phrases, "sitting at the feet," or "wearing out the door" of the one who instructs. These are both ways of communicating that one is learning from a master.

John the Baptist, who has disciples of his own, recognizes that there is something special about Jesus and points his disciples toward him. They are curious about this relatively young rabbi and decide to take the next steps and spend time with this person to understand more about him—thus the question about where he is staying.

Jesus replies by saying, “Come, and you will see” (Jn 1:39). His response to their inquiry is spontaneous, brief, and beautiful. An invitation with a promise is given, and their journey begins.

“What are you looking for?”

## PRAY

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God, I'm looking for more from this life. I'm not quite sure if you're real, where you fit in, or even exactly where I should begin to seek and find you. Accept this prayer as a first step in my journey. Guide my steps as I ask the bigger questions of life, and give me openness to what may be out there for me. Help me to use my mind to critically examine what is true, and let me see a sign or two that I'm on the right path. Amen.

## CONTEMPLATE

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“Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.”

*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1776*

**W O N D E R**

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1. What is your initial response to the question, “What are you looking for?”
2. Have you ever been misguided by thinking that something or someone was the final answer to the purpose of life? If so, what happened?
3. When is the last time you took time alone to think about life and where you’re going?
4. What may be some next steps for you in your spiritual journey?

# 2

## WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

*Luke 8:30*

The most important word in real estate is *location*. The most important word in searching for truth, meaning, and joy in life is *relationship*. Human beings have a desire to know the truth and be connected to another person, not merely to an idea or a philosophy. In chapter 8 of the Gospel of Luke, we read about Jesus and his small band of followers as they travel throughout the northern part of Israel called Galilee. What they experience and whom they encounter will certainly shake the disciples up, but it will also reveal to them in part who is this Jesus that they are beginning to follow.

Jesus enters a boat with his disciples and says, “Let us cross to the other side of the lake” (Lk 8:22). The reader might be tempted to think that the “other side” is merely an indication of where the disciples are heading, a directional detail. In Jesus’ day, however, the phrase, “the other side” had other implications apart from directional. The “other side” was the non-Jewish side, the Gentile side where Jewish religious law was neither observed nor practiced. Twenty-seven Jewish villages are mentioned in the gospels. With the exception of Jerusalem, they are each small and nondescript. Jesus is never recorded as entering a non-Jewish town, and it would be safe to assume that the disciples had never stepped foot

on the “other side” before they met Jesus. The Gentile side would have had non-kosher foods, graven images, theaters in which Greek and Roman gods were glorified, and a host of other cultural practices that would have made it difficult, if not impossible, for a faithful Jew to abide by the Law.

The disciples, who are at the initial stages of following Jesus, make a decision to step into the boat with him as he sets forth to sail to the other side. We can imagine the anxiety and trepidation these men experience as they start to trust Jesus, a young rabbi, and begin the voyage not knowing what to expect. However, traveling with Jesus proves more eventful than they could have imagined because in the midst of their short four mile journey, the unanticipated but not infrequent occurs. A violent windstorm sweeps down upon this body of water.

The Sea of Galilee lies 680 feet below sea level. It is surrounded by hills, especially on the east side where they reach in excess of two thousand feet high. These heights are a source of cool, dry desert air. In contrast, the climate on the water and shore is almost tropical, with warm, moist air. The great difference in height between surrounding land and the sea causes large temperature and pressure changes, resulting in strong winds funneling through the hills and sweeping down upon the sea. The Sea of Galilee is somewhat small, and these winds may descend directly to the center of the lake, with violent results. When the contrasting air pressures meet, a storm can arise quickly and without warning. Small boats caught out on the sea are in immediate danger; such is the case, as we read in this story, where the water is relatively shallow, only two hundred feet at its greatest depth.



During this violent storm, Jesus is asleep in the boat. The disciples are terrified and awaken him, crying out, “Master! Master! We are perishing!” (Lk 8:24). Jesus arises, he rebukes the wind and the waves, and they subside.

As the disciples step onto solid ground on the other side, we can only imagine the looks they exchange between themselves, perhaps expressing: “What have we gotten ourselves into?” and “Who is this man?” At that moment, as the disciples are pulling the boat ashore, they are confronted by a demon-possessed man wearing no clothes, who lives among the tombs. We read that iron chains and shackles couldn’t contain him. It’s easy to imagine the disciples walking slowly backwards, eager to get back into the boat and return to the “safe” side of the lake.

The man’s shocking appearance and possession by demonic spirits doesn’t deter Jesus from moving forward. While the disciples no doubt stare in wonder at the scene unfolding before their eyes, Jesus approaches and asks a question: “What is your name?” (Lk 8:30).

### *What Is Your Name?*

Exchanging names is the beginning of relationship. We are known by our names. Names can carry the weight of our ancestry for good or bad, and throughout the Bible, names not only designate a person’s identity, region, and family, but they also suggest the traits of the person. Knowing someone’s name empowers others because it carries with it an aspect of familiarity that implies they not only know who a person is but that they have some power over them.

The answer given to Jesus’ simple, relational, and straightforward question is alarming. It reveals not the man’s

name but, rather, his condition. His parents didn't name him "Legion," but the many demons who possess him identify themselves as such. This man is certainly to be pitied because he can't articulate his own name; he doesn't know who he is. In the presence of Jesus, the demons take flight, and we later find the man, once possessed, sitting at Jesus' feet, fully clothed and in his right mind.

We can only speculate as to what the disciples are thinking as this scene plays out before them. *Who is this man? The wind and waves obey him; those possessed by demons are set free from their affliction.*

Jesus' question, "What is your name?" allows us to change places with the once-possessed man and cast aside any preconceived notions we might have about Jesus or what we've heard about him through others. Jesus is not too concerned nor taken aback with the outward appearance of the man, his history in the village, his lack of status in the community. He sees beyond all these things and beyond his affliction. For us, Jesus' question has the ability to strip aside how we are defined by others and even how we may present ourselves before him.

We may have advanced degrees, drive expensive cars, and present ourselves as successful to the world, but at our cores, what are the names by which we define ourselves? We may live in poverty, have a history of poor decisions, and in the eyes of others, be a lost cause. Do we let the past define us when we stand before Jesus? Is it enough to stand in front of Jesus and introduce ourselves without any of our accomplishments, failures, excuses, or afflictions and begin to get to know him for ourselves and allow ourselves to grow in knowledge of him? Jesus affirms us as his children, created

in the image and likeness of God. Our value in his eyes never changes. In freedom, Jesus comes to meet you and me and calls us “friend,” as he did with Lazarus and even Judas.

The disciples, Jesus’ inner circle, started this journey in a boat in the midst of a storm and were beginning to see more than a carpenter, more than a religious teacher. The challenge for everyone intrigued by Jesus is to see him with fresh eyes and hear his words anew, and then we can begin to introduce ourselves to him. Perhaps we will be open to continuing the journey, for knowing about someone is vastly different than *knowing* them. Remember, it’s about relationship, relationship, relationship.

## PRAY

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Jesus, there are a lot of people who talk about you and claim to represent you. At times, I have no idea what is true or what to believe. More often than not, I’m skeptical. At times my life is like that boat on the sea, but unlike your followers, I don’t always know where to turn or whom to turn to. Here I am; allow me to get to know you more. Amen.

## CONTEMPLATE

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“If you are what you should be, you will set the whole world ablaze!”

*St. Catherine of Siena*

## WONDER

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1. What is holding you back from standing before Jesus and introducing yourself to him?
2. What do you think of when you hear the name *Jesus*?

3. Do you hide behind reputation, status, affliction, or prestige rather than letting others see you for who you are? If so, why?
4. Is there anything holding you back from letting Jesus and other people see you? What might you need to work on in yourself in order to open up to Jesus?