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Texts: Matthew 4: 18-22; John 1: 35-38  
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### “What Are You Looking For?”

Some individuals and families have acquired pandemic dogs. We’ve emphatically resisted. Not because the kids haven’t implored us weekly, or sometimes nightly. And not because Rachael and I don’t like dogs. Rather, it’s because we’ve conceded as much as we wish to the strictures and structures of domesticity. Not for us the morning and evening walks, the shedding, and the kennels when we wish to go somewhere. We did make one concession though. We got a hamster. Or rather, Augie got a hamster. His name is Harold. Harold is brown and white. He lives in a small glass terrarium with a little ramp that leads up to a second level, this one made of wire. That’s where his food is located. He’s got a wheel that he runs on, and he sleeps a lot, buried in a pile of bedding. At night, when I’m putting Augie to bed, Harold will often be starting his day (hamsters are, apparently, nocturnal). He busies himself rearranging his furniture. He runs on his wheel. And sometimes, he climbs onto the wire walls and begins to gnaw at the metal. At first I was worried, but Augie informed me that it’s normal for hamsters to do that. You see, Harold is merely filing his teeth, which keep on growing, the way human fingernails or toenails might. But the gnawing on the cage gives him a desperate kind of quality, as if he’s determined to chew his way out, to escape from his own Shawshank prison.

There are nights that I sit mesmerized by Harold. He’s pretty fascinating on his own terms, but I confess he’s been transformed into something more for me: a metaphor for life in a pandemic. I don’t know about all of you, but in our house, we’re all starting to feel as though we’re trapped in that little terrarium. We eat. We sleep. We run on our wheel – at school, at work, at home. We rearrange our domestic furniture. Then we sleep and eat and run on the wheel and push a few more things around and...that’s about it. Now, it could be worse. It could be a lot worse, and we have much to be thankful for. But lately, the kids seem as though they’re on the walls of that cage, trying to gnaw their way out. Each in their own way, they’ve showed signs of pandemic fatigue. Rachael and I feel it too. I know a lot of people do. Deep into the pandemic, with long months still to go, our lives are feeling pretty constricted. Many of us are working harder than we’ve ever worked before, and while we’re grateful to have work at all, it’s leaving us drained, with little time for the things that make us human. On the flip side, others of us have too little to do, and a gaping emptiness has opened in our lives. Whatever our particular circumstances, if we’re honest, many of us feel like we’re in that glass terrarium right now. We can see to an outside. We know it’s there. But we can’t get to it. Not right now. And not a few of us have taken to gnawing on the bars of our cage. The pandemic, in other words, has rendered many of us not a little unlike Harold.

Added to all of that has been the intensity and tension of the past few weeks. That too has taken a toll. And so at this point, I think it’s time to pull back a little bit, to ask some more basic questions, like: how are you doing, really? How are you handling things right now? What are the parts of your life that need attention? What do you need for the coming months in order to get through it with your sanity and humanity intact? If all goes well, 2021 will bring a gradual lightening of the burdens we’ve been carrying – there’s reason to be optimistic about many of the

developments on the horizon. If you've ever driven the Pennsylvania Turnpike, I envision the way before us as something like those enormous tunnels that cut through the Allegheny mountains. When you enter them, you can't even discern the other side. But then a small dot of sunlight appears, and it's a long way off. As you drive, that dot gradually widens and enlarges, until suddenly you're through it. I'd like to think that we're discerning that pinprick of light just now. But realistically, it's still a ways off. We'll still have to do what it takes to get ourselves there, intact and healthy. In our personal lives, as well as our professional lives and yes, our life here at the church, we'll have to keep on dodging, weaving and adapting as the need arises. But we're getting there. The pinprick of light is discernable in the distance. The questions remain: what do you need in order to get there? Feeling trapped in our own terrariums, gnawing at the wires as we are, what do we, what do you, need to do in order to take care of yourself right now? What do we need to do to take care of one another?

To answer that question, it may be helpful to consider an episode early in the Gospels, in which Jesus calls his first disciples. I've spoken often over the past few months about the importance of endurance, of digging deep and finding reserves of spirit and strength that we didn't know were there. Whether in the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrew people or the call in Hebrews to keep pressing forward, there are ample passages and stories to be found in the Bible about pressing on. But what we find in the calling of the disciples is something different, something that we might also need right now. There, we find a story about leaving it all behind in order to pursue that which brings life. The stories about calling the disciples aren't about endurance or persistence at all – they're about making a necessary change, in order to access our humanity. If we truly are gnawing the cage right now, perhaps those are the stories we most need, not the ones that simply say, keep going. Yes, we need to keep going, but maybe we also need to find ways to inject something different and new into this passage of days.

Consider the passage from Matthew: what's striking about it is how quickly, how easily, the first disciples simply abandon their work and set out for something new. It's as if they too had been gnawing the cage, trapped in the terrarium, waiting to be let out. There's Peter and his brother Andrew, fishing at the sea of Galilee. We can imagine them doing that very same thing more or less from the time of their birth, and we can imagine they might have done the same until their time on the planet was up, until Jesus says, "Come on...follow me!" And then there's James and John, mending their fishing nets on the shore, along with their father – we can imagine much the same for them. All it takes is a word, and they're off, as if they had been waiting their whole lives for that moment. What was it that compelled them to simply drop what they were doing, and to leave it all behind? Were they bored? Was it the prospect of something better? Was it a mid-life crisis? Was there the possibility that whatever this stranger was up to, it answered to a profound existential need in their lives? Whatever their reasons, Peter and Andrew, James and John, respond to the invitation. They say yes – to Jesus, but also to themselves, to the world, to life. In that instance, they don't choose persistence or endurance. They swerve, they shift, they improvise: they leave their nets behind.

In John's Gospel, the story runs differently. There, a few folks start tagging along with Jesus at a distance, attracted by something about what he was up to. They too had swerved and shifted and improvised, but this time instead of an invitation, Jesus delivers a question: "What are you looking for?"

Sit with that question for a while and make it your own. It's meant for you just as much as it was meant for those stray followers. What are you looking for? It's a universal question, asked of every single person who lives or has ever lived on this planet. What is it that you want,

deep down? What is it that you really desire? I wonder how many people ever ask themselves that question, let alone ponder it, and try to respond. After the question of a career or a decent job has been answered, what are you looking for? After the question of finding some kind of life partner, however that's defined, has been answered, what are you looking for? After the question of food and clothing and shelter and amusement has been answered, what are you looking for? After you get what you think you want, and you still feel like gnawing the cage, what then are you looking for? Love? Belonging? Experience? Knowledge? Forgiveness? Justice? Mercy? Purpose? What are you looking for?

Jeff Gordinier is a writer who knows something about being trapped in a glass terrarium. He knows what it is to be asked what you're looking for, and to set off in pursuit of it. Gordinier is a food writer whose byline has appeared in a good many national publications. On the surface, he achieved a level of success that relatively few manage to do. But for a variety of reasons, his life was unravelling. His marriage fell apart. He was separated from his children. He was living in a crummy bachelor apartment, the kind of sad place that men of a certain age inhabit after a divorce. His finances were in the tank. Whatever the magazines he wrote for, Jeff Gordinier was in the terrarium, without a way to get out.

It was during that time that a publishing agent called and said that a particular chef wanted to talk about a new project. Gordinier shrugged. It's like someone calling a preacher and saying that sermon needs to be written – it happens every seven days. For Gordinier, such a call initiated a transactional exchange – he gets another story, the chef gets a little publicity. Gordinier took the assignment. The chef in question was a charismatic artist named Rene Redzepi, who is to food what Dylan was to music in the 60's, or what Bowie was in the 70's: an innovator who changes the entire field of discourse around him. And something clicked between the two of them. It wasn't long after that that Gordinier got a text message on his phone: Redzepi was offering a reservation for two at his restaurant in Copenhagen – something nearly impossible to come by. The invitation came with a hitch: the reservation was only 48 hours away. There was the question of money. The question of time. The question of the obligations he would have to renege on, the question of responsibility, the question of steadiness and duty. Would he stay? Or would he swerve? What was it he was looking for?

Pause here for a second. I'm curious what you would do. Imagine a friend or acquaintance asked you to step outside of the ordinary, to do something unusual, on a whim. Would you just keep on mending your nets? Would you have a haircut appointment to keep? A work assignment due? Would you decline, simply because it was out of character? Or would you, perhaps, just perhaps, say yes? There's something noble in being one who is dependable and steady, there's something undeniably good about being one who does what needs to be done. I thank God in those qualities in people. But I'll also tell you that I worry sometimes that in all that steadiness and dependability, we allow our Jesus moment to pass us by. We decline those moments that wind up opening us, broadening us, getting us out of the terrarium that we've been staring out of. If you received the call, what would you do?

You won't be surprised to know that Jeff Gordinier said yes, and it wound up changing his life. Saying yes is what started to pull him out of his malaise. Saying yes is what led to a new friendship. Saying yes is what led to a series of questions about the origins of creativity and inspiration in one's life and work. Saying yes is what led him to write a book called *Hungry*. Jeff Gordinier wound up saying yes, and it freed him from the terrarium he was living in. After so much gnawing, the steel wires gave, and he was out of the cage.

So ok, there are reasons that story might not go over well right now. Even in his malaise, Gordinier is privileged in ways that few of us are. Even in the best of times, no one invites us to drop what we're doing and go to Copenhagen. And in a pandemic, a tale like that might be something like showing a picture of bread to someone who's starving: cruel because it's unattainable. Not only that, as one person I talked to this week put it, "I'm filled with a special kind of dread in being told to say yes to one more thing. What I need is to say no to extra things, those so-called opportunities that might change my life!" Touché. Yes indeed. Our circumstances are different, and there are all sorts of things that we need to say no to right now of necessity. Play dates and holiday travel, gatherings with friends and dinners out – there are things we need to say no to right now, for our own good and for the good of those around us.

But given those constraints, what do we need to say yes to? What are the obligations we need to let go of, at least temporarily, in order to preserve our sanity? What's the swerve, the departure, the improvisation that we could introduce even under the constraints we face? What is it that we're looking for now, that would allow us to get through the remainder of this pandemic intact and whole?

To judge by the stories from the Gospels and Jeff Gordinier alike, it's human connection first and foremost. It's friendship, companionship, and the kind of energy and creativity that can arise when we're in touch with other people. That's why it's so important to keep on making phone calls to people you love, to keep on having those Zoom conversations with those you miss, to keep on reaching out to those who might be feeling adrift. We continue to do that around here, as we've done all along. I want this community to be one in which people feel known, loved, and cared for. Even if other connections are hard to come by these days, I want this to be a community that you can fall back upon, a community of grace and acceptance and trust. Most of all, we need to keep reaching out, and finding ways to keep the relationships in our lives strong.

Here's another thing the stories indicate. It's a yearning for difference, for variety, for the swerve. And so let me say in the most pastoral way possible, that if you're feeling overwhelmed right now, find a way to give yourself a break. In the name of your humanity and health, give yourself a break. Don't go into work one day. Let the kids take a day off. Order out. Eat well. Cook a new recipe. Take a drive to a part of the state that you've never visited. Read a book that you've always meant to read. Walk or run in a place you don't typically go to. Be a little less prepared if you need to be. Take care of yourself, honor yourself, love yourself. If you're lucky, there will be people around you that will help you do that, but right now, let's assume you've got to stand up for yourself and claim that self-care. Even if only for a time, leave off mending the nets, and say yes to whatever it is that you need in this moment, while still remaining mindful of the need for extra caution. Limited though we are, there are still ways to say yes to life.

There will be resistance. It might come from those around you. It might come from little voices inside of you, voices telling you to stay in the rut, to stay in the terrarium. I know all about that. Not long ago, I shared with my kids that I felt we were becoming a little like Harold. I told them I didn't know quite what we could do about that, except to interrupt our habits a little bit. I suggested a hike in the woods to a beautiful promontory, something challenging but doable. The voices of resistance were fierce. It was easier, and better, to just keep on doing what we were doing. I'm here to tell you that it took an enormous amount of cajoling and persuasion to achieve even that small, tiny swerve. It didn't go perfectly. One of the kids developed a sore foot, and another didn't want to hike all the way to the lookout. And so we

improvised. Instead of climbing to the promontory, we found a remote meadow, and we sat there for a while, noticing what was around us. Then we found another meadow, with a cluster of pine trees scattered about, and it reminded the kids of something haunted, or magical. In time, we circled back to the van. It had taken a lot to do even that much. But then on the way home, one of them said, kind of quietly: I kind of liked that.

We've still got a ways to go. Remember Harold the hamster. When you're feeling trapped in the terrarium, find a way to yield to the swerve. Take care of yourself. And lean on one another when you're not feeling strong.