SERMON
St. Peter's UCC
January 18, 2026
"What Are You Looking for?"
SNOW on 18th and 25th – recorded 1.23

Scripture:
Isaiah 49:5-7 The servant's mission
Psalm 40:4, 6-11
John 1:35-42 The first disciples of Jesus

(Kat play Higher Ground quietly on piano for beginning of sermon.)

The author of the lyrics of a hymn called "Higher Ground," also called, "I'm Pressing on the Upward Way," wrote on a feeling he had, an unarticulated feeling that longed for something; something beyond doubts and fears, beyond daily darts of hurt and evil.

The author, Johnson Oatman, longed for an end to the suffering of this world, and he longed for something better. He wasn't sure what that better something would be exactly, but his faith led him to believe that it would only be found in and through God.

In his mind, in his spirit, Oatman envisioned that better place as higher ground. That image of higher ground eased his sense of longing. That image of higher ground gave comfort to his soul.

Oatman doesn't say in the hymn what he'll find on higher ground; he only knows that he longs to be there. He hopes that maybe he'll catch a gleam of glory bright or hear a strain of the song of the saints. He hopes to be touched by God in a way that will sustain him until the fullness of grace in heaven.

Oatman doesn't see the treasure clearly; he doesn't say that he knows exactly what he's looking for. He only knows that his hope, and the desires of his faith, seek higher ground; higher ground, where someone may rest in the grace of God; higher ground where hopes feel answered.

That sense of longing, and a sense of seeking, is not uncommon for anyone on a path of faith. We know the struggles of the world all too well, and we seek in God an answer to our longings and hopes, both in this world and the next.

Way back in the time of Jesus, a time when all the land was under the cruel grasp of the Roman Empire, the people back then also longed for that feeling of higher ground. They knew all too well the fears and

stinging darts of daily life, and in their faith, they sought for hope; true hope.

Just before Christmas every year, we hear an example of such hope in the words uttered by Mary, mother of Jesus, when she is convinced that, in her womb, is the son of the Most High. In what is called the Magnificat, Mary's spirit rejoices in a God who will bring mercy to the people, scattering the proud, and lifting up the lowly; filling the hungry with good things.

Also back in that time, the time of Jesus, many people were looking to John the Baptist as a place for their hopes to land. Again, they weren't exactly clear what it was they were seeking; they only hoped to find it there; not on higher ground, but in the River Jordan.

John the Baptist was well known, and his voice carried the power of God, for he was a true prophet for God. In time, there were those who began to follow the Baptist. They weren't satisfied in simply being baptized by water; their longing went deeper than that. They were seeking

more than that. They wouldn't have known exactly what it was they were seeking; they only hoped to find it there with him; with John the Baptist.

Then a day came when they heard John the Baptist exclaim, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The Bible says that two of John the Baptist's disciples, two of his followers, heard him say this, and so they decided to follow Jesus; follow this one called the Lamb of God.

Now, such a description in the Bible lets us know that the two followers of the Baptist didn't know exactly who Jesus was, and I doubt they could possibly even know quite why they followed him; they just did. Whatever hope, whatever longing they felt inside that first brought them to John the Baptist, unarticulated, more a feeling or desire beyond words, that hope, that longing, now was leading them to Jesus.

The Bible continues the description of the moment by saying, "When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?"

"What are you looking for?" That's a big question, especially in the context of disciples seeking God in a new way; a way beyond the walls of the Temple in Jerusalem, and instead in and by the waters of the Jordan.

Jesus says, "What are you looking for?" And then, what an odd response they give. Jesus asks the big question; the very question their own souls have been asking, the very question they have sought to answer, "What are you looking for?" and they simply say back to Jesus, "Where are you staying?"

Here is Jesus the Christ, offering them an opportunity to ask anything they want about their faith and what they are seeking, what they are longing for, and yet, the two disciples of John the Baptist simply say, "Where are you staying?" They didn't ask what their meaning and purpose was in life, they didn't ask for the meaning of life or a description of their true identity in God, they just sort of unthinkingly responded by asking Jesus where he was staying.

Jesus then gives a response that carries an offer with a double meaning. Jesus responds to their question of where he is staying by saying, “Come and see.”

What a perfect response. Jesus knows that they are seeking more than an address for where he is staying. He is aware that they don’t quite know what to say. He knows that they aren’t sure what they are seeking, and so he simply says, “Come and see.”

The two who followed Jesus don’t know exactly what they are doing or why; they simply want a feeling of higher ground above the fray. They want a feeling of new life coming into their world; a world controlled by the oppressive Roman Empire. They want what John the Baptist is doing by the River Jordan to be carried even further. They want an answer, a “yes,” to the longing in their spirit.

One of the two disciples of John the Baptist that followed Jesus was a man named Andrew. In his time with Jesus that day, he finally found the “yes” to his longing, the answer to his hope. He went and found his brother Simon, exclaiming, “We have found the Messiah!” Andrew

brought his brother to Jesus, and Jesus said to Simon that he would be called Cephas, meaning Petros or Peter; the rock.

In our world today, many people are seeking something; feeling a stirring in their spirits, but they don't quite know what it is; they don't know what to make of it or where to go with it, and then, too often, life's demands cover up that spark until perhaps another time.

It's wonderful that the church, the body of Christ in the world, seeks understanding as to our meaning and purpose in life, and our true identity in God, because the world needs places for such reflection and discussion. But I think that many people outside the church, especially those who have not been actively following a faith path, are simply noticing a feeling inside themselves sometimes, a passing thought; a stirring of some sort that doesn't even quite know what question to ask, much less what answer to seek.

And so, if a Christian were to notice a stirring in someone, perhaps revealed in a passing comment or a question; an unarticulated stirring that seems to be seeking something, that person probably doesn't need some

fancy explanation, because they may not even quite know what they are feeling or asking for sure. Maybe they only need someone to say to them, "Come and see." If a Christian were to ask them, "What are you looking for?" the answer may make no more sense than the followers who asked Jesus where he was staying. That's because they may not know what they are seeking or feeling, even though something within them hopes to find something anyway.

If a moment reveals someone with a small spark inside; a question, a wondering, a curiosity, maybe even a longing for something unclear, they might only need and want someone to say to them, "Come and see."

At the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, there is what is called The Great Commission. These are the last words of the Resurrected Jesus in Matthew. In those words, he tells the Apostles to go and make disciples of all nations.

And what is the training required to go and make disciples? We have to be able to say three words: "Come and see." We don't have to be as

articulate as the Apostle Paul or as bold as Peter, for we have our guidance from Jesus himself, when he simply said, “Come and see.”

If someone isn’t sure what they are looking for, we don’t have to figure out for them what’s stirring in their soul. We just need to offer hope and a way by saying, “Come and see.” Come and see people in a church family who dare to believe and hope and care in a world of cynics; people who understand the gift and power of simply gathering in the name of God, breaking the power of the world’s isolation and division and suspicion and enmity.

No matter the time of year in our church, if you’re headed to Hanging of the Greens or Blessing of the Hounds, or Christmas Eve, or an Easter service, or a Chili Cook-Off, or a Fisherman’s Breakfast, and someone asks where you are going, why not say, “Come and see.” Those words might end up being the way to higher ground, or new life in the water of baptism, or a sense of belonging that feeds the soul.

How would you feel if, even just once in your life, someone came with you to St. Peter’s, maybe to eat or to see the beauty of Thanksgiving

morning, or to sing some Christmas carols, but in that they confessed to catching a gleam of glory; just a hint of heaven's light? What if they felt in a song to God something that seemed to go beyond the walls of the church, connecting them in spirit with the saints of every time and place, if only for a moment?

What if, by surprise, they felt Christ asking them what they were looking for, and they felt as if Christ was saying to them personally, "Come and see." When people are feeling something that might be leading them to their spiritual side, trust that God will take care of the powerful work of the Spirit. We need only say, "Come and see," and hope they see that life in Christ is more wondrous and miraculous than our greatest hopes could ever imagine.

If, even once in our lives, we could do that for someone, we too would feel blessed for all our years, because we would have given as great a gift as life can offer.

Holy God, for all those who seek higher ground, for all those who seek a place for their questioning spirits to land, help St. Peter's be that higher ground and that meeting place of heaven and earth. Help us in our mission to offer Good News in our world of struggle. As stewards of your dream for our world, help us to make such heavenly dreams come true; in Jesus' name. Amen.