



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

What Are You Looking For?

January 19, 2020

Text: John 1: 29-42

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.’ John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I 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.” I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God. The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The 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?’ He 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. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated Anointed^{*}). He 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).



Sermon:

Good morning, church! It is lovely to be with you again this morning. What I want to talk to you about today is identity. Do you know the story of your name? Are you named for somebody in your family? Are you named for a place that was important for your parents? How are you known in the world? I am named Adele because my mother’s mother always wished that she’d named my mother ‘Adele.’ Instead she named her ‘Candace.’ I’m not sure why. Since she wished she’d named my mother ‘Adele,” my mother wanted to name me ‘Adele.’ The other reason I’m called ‘Adele,’ is because my father was advocating for the name ‘Deborah,’ because he wanted to call me ‘Debbie.’ But my mother abhorred nicknames, and she figured that Adele was not *nicknameable*.

So I've been known as Adele, and as an adult I've grown into my name but as a child I didn't like it at all because I didn't know any other Adele's. I wanted desperately to be somebody called Debbie or Kathleen or Ellen—someone who would fit it a little bit better. But as an adult I began to grow into the uniqueness of my name and be comfortable with it. And when I learned that my great grandmother was named 'Della,' I hoped that I had been named in honor of her. I like imagining that I'm related in name to my great grandmother. Now I don't even have to spell my name when I go places or make a reservation because Adele the pop singer has made it super easy for me.

So what's the story of your name? How are you known in the world? In our scripture passage for this morning, John is in the business of naming people. He's trying to identify people and give them titles we can understand. Let me just remind you—John is written about 150 or even 200 years after the death of Jesus. John is not like the other three Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke are like tight brothers. For this reason they're referred to as the 'Synoptic' Gospels because they share so much material in common. In fact, biblical scholars believe that Matthew and Luke are derivatives of Mark. While John shares some of the same stories, they're in a different order, and he's kind of the odd man out. But he has some of the most beautifully chosen language of the Gospels. He is clearly adept in Greek and highly creative. So when John speaks about how we're naming people, it's good for us to pay attention, because he's very specific in the way he's crafted his whole book.

Now in the beginning of John you'll remember the beautiful prose we often read at Christmas, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." He uses beautiful, poetic language to describe who Jesus is. It's not at all like the way the other Gospels start out. Then John introduces himself and comes back to tell this story of who Jesus is. He plunges right into it. He wants us to know who Jesus is. And he wants us to know that Jesus isn't just some good preacher you should check out sometime, or a guy who's done a really great Ted talk you should look up on YouTube. He wants you to know that Jesus is a savior. The Savior. He is the Lamb of God—the one who is the Son of God. He is the one who is going to baptize with the Holy Spirit. He's the one who John has been talking about in his own preaching. To be clear—John the Baptist and John the Gospel writer are not the same people. And John the Baptist isn't really John the Baptist in John's Gospel; he's really John the Witness.

So here's John the Witness who announces to his companions as Jesus walks by, "There goes the Lamb of God!" And they follow along; they go with him. I don't know if I would be so quick to do that; perhaps you wouldn't either. Imagine someone on the streets of Stockbridge saying, "There goes the Lamb of God!" But the two men follow, and before they can say anything, Jesus turns around to face them. He does this really weird thing; he doesn't introduce himself; he doesn't say his name or ask, "Who are you?" He just turns around and asks, "What are you looking for?"

I suppose we could read this as a kind of indictment, as for example, if someone's following close behind me, I might spin around with hands on my hips and say, "What are you looking for?" But I don't think that's where Jesus is coming from with this. "What are you looking for?" In John's Gospel, these are the first words out of Jesus' mouth. It's not a sermon. It's not an exorcism. It's not a proclamation of the coming Kingdom—which it is in the other three

accounts. Instead, it's a question.

“What are you looking for?” The richness of this question in the original Greek is worth noticing, because the question can also be translated as, “What are you seeking?” or “What do you hope to find?” Or even, “What do you need? What do you long for?” It's a really good question and one that we could be asking more frequently in the church. It's not like when you walk into a shop, and they ask, “What are you looking for? Maybe I can help you.” Meanwhile, they've already decided that the answer to whatever it is that you're looking for is bigger and more expensive than whatever you went in thinking that you needed. Jesus isn't up selling here. Jesus isn't actually selling anything. He just says, “What are you looking for? What do you most hope for?”

Isn't the writer of John's Gospel brilliant? Here he is naming Jesus in all kinds of ways, such as the Word, the Light, the Lamb of God, the Son of God—and the writer has Jesus' first followers calling him, “rabbi,” which means teacher or “Messiah,” which means Anointed One, but how does Jesus name himself? How does Jesus most want to be known in the world, according to John? It is as one who asks the question, “What do you most hope for?” then he listens for your answer and then invites you to ‘come and see...’

I confess that I almost missed that this week; I got distracted by the names in the stories, as well as by the stories I could tell about my name or the stories you could tell about your names. I got distracted by all of that, and I was down a rabbit hole with all these names, when this verse popped up as though Jesus himself were sitting next to me and asked me, “What are you looking for? Adele, what are you looking for?” I thought to myself, *I don't really know*. But then I realized that wasn't actually true; it's just that I knew what I was looking for; I know what I hope for, and I know that it can't be found down that rabbit hole I was caught up in. But I was afraid to say it out loud, because as long as I didn't reveal what it was that I hoped for, then I couldn't be disappointed. Nobody could ever look at me and say, “Oh, you are silly for having such high hopes.” And nobody could pity me when my dreams don't come true.

When Jesus asks the two men what they're looking for, they reply, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Now here again, we might read this as if to say, “What hotel are you in? Are you at the Red Lion Inn or the Courtyard Marriott? We want to show up and have a drink with you later.” But that's not really what they're asking. Again, the translation is a little bit weak here. What they're really asking is, “Where is Jesus dwelling? Where is Jesus abiding?” They want to know where they can come and simply be with him. And that's what leads to Jesus' invitation. He simply says, “Come and See.” It's clear; it's relational and it's easily repeatable, as some of these followers will do in just a few verses. Andrew will say it to Simon, and Philip will say it to Nathaniel.

Friends, what if the thing that John wants us to take away in all this naming is that Jesus wants to be known more than any title or any name could convey, as the one who most wants to know what we hope for? He could be the one who puts us so much at ease in the asking that we might actually tell him. What if John wants us to be known as the ones who meet Jesus and then invite others to come and see?

You have a beautiful new Website. It has gorgeous photos and well-written descriptions that in various ways say, “Come and see.” It’s a beautiful invitation, and it seems to me a beautiful representation of who you are and whose you are. But what Jesus calls us to do is to be known as his followers—to be known as the ones who on the side of the road could say, “Look! The Lamb of God.” Or they could call out, “The Light of the World!” Or “The Word made Flesh!” In this season of Epiphany when we are called to bear light into the world, the question is—how will we be known? Will you be known as Bill or Adele or Liz or Casey, or Ellen or Margo? Will you be known by your surnames? Will you be known by the titles that you bear whether worked for or inherited? Or will you be known simply as “Beloved?” Will you be known as the ones who bear light into the world as Christ did? How has that light from Christmas, even in the last couple days, changed you? How has it changed us all? As we head into this week which will honor Civil Rights activist, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. —as the Senate deals with the impeachment of the president of the United States, and as we tune into news that will undoubtedly report more of the devastation in Puerto Rico, and perhaps also the bravery of Representative Ayanna Pressley, how will we be known in the midst of all of that? I want to suggest that you not do what I do—that you not get distracted by names. Instead, tell Jesus what it is you really hope for, and then accept his invitation to “Come and See.” It’s only when we do that that we can go out and tell others—that we can say to friends, “Come and See.” Yes, you can say that Pastor Brent is a fabulous preacher, or you could say that you have this beautiful choir, and you should. But you could also say, “Come and see this community of faith where we pray together, where we lift each other up when we’re down and we rejoice when someone celebrates, and where we struggle to be faithful followers of the One who was the Word, and the Light, and God made Flesh. Come and see.”

Amen.



The Rev. Adele Crawford