

What is in a Name?

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The first chapter in John like the other gospels, Matthew Mark and Luke, begins by establishing who Jesus is. Each of the gospel writers reflect the struggle of the early church and the struggle that we have today of trying to figure out who this God in human form is and what that means to us. Each writer tells stories of Jesus to help the believers understand what it means to have the Son of God with us on earth.

Luke begins with a family tree and the visit of angels upon Elizabeth and Mary. In the beauty of the birth story, Luke declares to the world that Jesus is the Savior from the time of conception. Matthew follows the same line with a bit a divergence in telling of Jesus' birth. The Matthew gospel writer focuses on Joseph the human father who brings up Jesus and his role of accepting the birth of this God/child. For Mark, it is at Jesus' baptism that all may know his divine roots. Mark begins Jesus' story of the good news of salvation with Jesus as an adult.

That brings us to the gospel of John. John is the most esoteric of the bunch. Who Christ is established at the time of before creation with the Word and the Word becomes flesh.

Like the early Christians who come seeking answers to our questions. Who is this Christ to whom we confess and whom we claim to follow? In our own way, we seek the identity of Jesus as we try to figure out what he means in our lives. Is he human or is he God? If he is both, what parts are his human traits and what are divine? Did he know he was the Messiah from birth or was it a growing awareness? Is he with us now or is he with God? We proclaim we are his followers, but whom exactly are we following?

On Christmas Eve, we heard from the first words of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." We are still trying to understand that. Last Sunday, Jesus was baptized and a voice from

heaven came and said this is my son, my beloved of whom I am well pleased. Jesus is designated from the heavens above. These statements name Jesus through God. The Word was with God and the Word was God; this is my son my beloved. Today we have another dimension as to who Jesus is and it comes from a human source, Jesus' cousin, John. Like last week, John the Baptist has a key role helping us understand who Jesus is.

A READING FROM JOHN CHAPTER 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 Son of God." 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).

This is the Word of the Lord thanks be to God.

Do you have a nickname? A name not on your birth certificate and not the name that you were called when you were baptized, but a name that distinguished you

from others? What a problem this becomes when the names on our Driver's license and Social Security Card and Passport are not exactly the same. Are you Gregory or Gregg? Who are you? Are you Carl with a C or a K? With the last name of Fisher, you can only imagine the variations I got as a nickname through high school and college. Fortunately they did not stick. Jesus was prone to give nicknames to his disciples. Simon, he renamed, Cephas or Peter; the rock; hey Rocky! And it stuck. We all know the disciple Peter! Nicknames can either help us to understand a person better, or confuse us a bit more. John; the Baptist, distinguishes him from the other Johns in the Bible.

In our scripture today. John, sees Jesus coming towards him and John says, "Here is the Passover Lamb who forgives the sins of the world." First of all, that is a very long nickname. Secondly, that name is so full of meaning that through the ages we are still unpacking it.

Last week it was the Holy Spirit who set Jesus apart by calling him Son. This week we have a human being pointing to Jesus saying look here is the Passover lamb, the Lamb of God who forgives the sins of the world.

As John points at Jesus and renames him. John is telling the people to the one whom they should follow. Here this Lamb of God will forgive not only your sins and personal flaws but the sins of the world!

Do we need a lamb from God; do we need someone to make things right for us? If all went according to plan; if Adam and Eve never tried to be God; if Israel and Judah did not turn away from God, then there would be no need for a Lamb of God.

If dictators and authoritarian leaders did not try to suppress and control others. If leaders would not intentionally starve their own people or nations systematically try to destroy another race, there would not be a need for someone to forgive the sins of the world. If greedy and self-centered people did not have horde-limited resources, we would not need a Lamb of God in this world. Our world is not perfect and so John's nickname for Jesus is what we need for this broken world.

John's message is for the people to turn from their destructive path and to turn toward God. When we do, we have the Lamb of God to take the sins away.

At this time in John's Gospel, the people are trying to understand who John is and the up walks this stranger, Jesus, and John directs the attention off himself, turns to Jesus, and says, folks here is the guy and you know what I barely know him, but I trust what God is telling me. Listen to him! He is also the Passover Lamb. John does this not only once but two days in a row, in case they were not listening the first time. This guy is the real thing -- God's Lamb for us!

Quite frankly, being called the Passover Lamb is not a compliment! You know what they use sheep for -- they make pretty good meals. They are not petting animals that render respect or are even noteworthy. Then to be the Passover Lamb, the one who is slaughtered for the Passover. It is the lamb's blood that is placed on the doorway so that the angel of death passes over the homes of the Israelites during the great exodus. It is the purest lamb that gets sacrificed, not the one that is defected, the one without blemish.

John calls out that Jesus of Nazareth is the Lamb of God who comes to this broken world and makes it right. That is why as dark as this world gets, the darkness is not the end of the story. This is the one who will delve into the dark side of humanity and restore it to the light.

I dare say this identity of Jesus makes us more confused in our understanding of who God is. We can play in our heads with the Word becoming flesh, we can make the connection of Jesus as Son of God, but for God to connect with us by getting to the dirt the sludge of humanity and removing it from us by way of sacrifice of another, why that is getting a bit too personal and confusing.

We try to clean it up, we try to sanitize it and make the Lamb of God the cutest little lamb that you ever have seen, but this isn't a gamble on the lawn on a spring day. God came to this earth with a mission. God came in Jesus to tell humans that all is not lost. And God's love is with us even in all our messiness. Jesus enters into the brokenness, gets into the muck and stench of humanity, and takes our sins from us.

The people hear what John is saying, they see the stranger and some follow Jesus into town. Jesus stops and turns to them, “what are you looking for?” They respond. They want a rabbi, a teacher. They do not say what John has told them. They do not say they want God’s Passover Lamb. They seek to be taught. They either do not understand or are not bold enough to ask this man to make things right for them. It is too big a step. But they are willing to begin the journey instead of saying we know who you are. We get it, they say, tell us more. Teach us. “Give us more to try to understand who you are and what this is all about.”

As we know through Jesus’ ministry and teaching, the disciples continue to struggle to understand to try to find out whom Jesus God with us truly means.

These followers are presented with the ultimate, the one who has the power to restore creation back to perfection. The enormity of that identity is too great. The implications of that role far beyond the human scope.

They know enough -- enough to want to follow and they seek a teacher to tell them more. They know enough not to give up and go away but desire to be led to the new horizons of God’s mercy. They have been presented with a full course meal, but these followers say let’s start with an appetizer let’s begin by you being our Rabbi.

Here begins Jesus’ ministry in John. In the midst of the ugliness of sin and brokenness and the despair that can be overwhelming of what we can do to fix it, John presents the world with the Lamb of God, the one who will give all so that from the depth of sin there is hope of restoration.

Whenever the headline news simply gets too much for us, when it seems we can’t change ourselves or our neighbor or our world, turn to this first chapter in John. Read that from the beginning God is with us. Read on and hear God proclaim that Jesus is God’s son and continue reading as very human John says, “Hear he is folks this is the Lamb of God who has the capability of making things right in the world.” When you do, all we can do is say “Jesus tell us more. Teach us now, today.” Thanks be to God. Amen