

Reverend Doctor King (Yes, Both Titles are Key) John 1:29-42 and Psalm 40:1-20
 Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on January 15, 2023

Oh, to be a preacher like John the Baptist. Things happened fast around him. Hanging out with two of his disciples, he watched Jesus walk by and said, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” Those two instantaneously took off after Jesus. I wonder when he noticed that he was being followed. Jesus turned and saw them following and asked John’s disciples what they were looking for and they answered, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” At this point in the story, Jesus has been called three names – Lamb of God, Son of God, and Rabbi. In a few more verses, Andrew will call him Messiah. And we’re only in the first chapter of John’s Gospel! The gospel writer is clear in the opening verses of the Prologue that Jesus is preexistent and one with God¹ when he wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and lived among us...No one has ever seen God, it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”²

Apparently, Jesus’ preexistence and oneness with God needed clarification. In our brief reading, the Spirit of God descended from heaven and remained on Jesus. In the meantime, he was given four titles – Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi, and Messiah. These four titles reflect what Jesus does. As Lamb of God, he bridges the distance between us and God that is described as the sin (singular) of the world – God intervenes in the world on behalf of God’s people.³ As Son of God, Jesus is the incarnation, the word made flesh who makes God known. The implication is that as Jesus does, God would do. We glimpse God through the life and ministry of Jesus. As Rabbi, Jesus is a teacher. When the disciples call him Rabbi, it’s Jewish shorthand for their desire to learn from him.⁴ When Jesus says, “Come and see,” he’s inviting them to learn from his words and participate in his ministry, embodying his teaching in the world around them. As Messiah, Jesus is identified as the one to fulfill Jewish messianic hope as an heir of King David.⁵

¹ Jillian Engelhardt, Adjunct Instructor, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX. Commentary on John 1:29-42 for January 15, 2023. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-john-129-42-6>

² John 1:1, 14, 18

³ Ibid., Engelhardt.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

One striking part of this story is that none of Jesus' titles make him unapproachable. They only make him more compelling for the disciples to follow, to participate in what Jesus is doing in the world. I've wondered if this is because the titles consolidate God's power and promise into Jesus in the way of freedom. God shows up to draw people closer, to love them, and to acknowledge them as his children. If you haven't had a chance to listen to Pastor Ann preach last week, go back and give it a listen.⁶ She asked us to imagine how we might live in the world if our baptismal identity as Child of God was the center point in our lives, much as it was for Jesus when God called him "Beloved" at his baptism. "Being grounded in God's love moved and sustained all of the ministry that followed, giving new life and love to the world," Pastor Ann preached.

The four titles we hear in the story today, centers Jesus as the one doing the heavy lifting of the relationship with the disciples so that they are set free to participate in Jesus' love for the world. This weekend, our country celebrates Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. We often hear him referred to as Dr. King. Less often do we hear him referred to by both of his titles – Reverend and Doctor. And far less often, maybe never, do we hear him referred to with his primary identity as Child of God. But it was his identity as Child of God, imperfect and beloved, that freed him to risk everything, even his own life, as he worked with Black Americans in securing their Civil Rights. But he didn't stop there. He worked with American Jews and White Christians, expanding the circle of activists to address issues of poverty and violence too. As Children of God, we are drawn by Jesus into ever expanding relationships through which we hear all kinds of voices quite different from our own.

We'll experience a small but mighty whisper of the power of our differences as we sing our Sending Song at the end of worship today. Sometimes called the Black National Anthem, we'll join our voices with our Black friends, family, and siblings in faith as we sing, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Black communities of faith traditionally sing this song slowly, a practice that we'll follow this morning. When we get to it, settle in and enjoy either singing or listening. In ways like hymn singing, we participate across our differences symbolically.

⁶ Pastor Ann Hultquist preaches on Livestream on January 8, 2023, minute 41:25. While you're at it, catch the ridiculous cuteness of her time with the kids on the steps at minute 35:22.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E55OBybmIl0>

As we sang in Psalm 40 this morning: The Lord put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many shall see, and stand in awe, and put their trust in the Lord.⁷ Released from fear, freed by Jesus who calls us to “Come and see,” we participate in God’s ministry of freedom for all people – including continuing to advocate with our Black friends, family, and neighbors – in ways that are more than symbolic too. We participate in ways that are systemic, advocating with our neighbor for their good as well as our own.

As people in the United States, we can get pretty antsy about the separation of church and state. The Founders of the United States were clear that the church should not control the government and that the government should not control the church. Both are healthier without oppression by the other and with freedom from a sense of entitlement over the other. As Jesus followers, we are called by our faith to the good of our neighbor. In the Bible, our neighbor can be anyone and includes everyone.⁸ Jesus taught his followers to feed the hungry, heal the sick, care for the stranger, and to free the prisoners. This was not symbolic, and it wasn’t only about charity, although giving food and money and other items are needed to ease immediate suffering. Something you all as a congregation have a lot of heart for. Our prayer after communion in the worship liturgy for these Sundays after Epiphany prays to God to “renew our strength to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you.” A reference to Bible verses in the book of Micah, chapter 6.⁹

Kindness can be understood as charity – that which we give away to people who need it. And justice is understood as making systemic changes so that people don’t need us to give them those things. Our Soup Shelf is charity. Our money gifts to buy Advent Farms for ELCA World Hunger is part charity and part justice because the farms create a systemic change for families around the world to produce food for themselves and to sell at market.¹⁰ Augustana’s CAN¹¹ Ministry Human Dignity Delegates are undertaking justice work at both the state and local levels this spring. At the state level, the Colorado Legislative session begins next

⁷ Psalm 40:3

⁸ See Jesus’ teaching about the Good Samaritan as one example – Luke 10:25-37

⁹ Micah 6:6-8

¹⁰ Don Troike in the soon to be published February Tower newsletter of Augustana.

¹¹ CAN = Compassion and Action with our Neighbor Ministry

week. There will be opportunities aplenty for us to advocate with our neighbors for legislation for their good as well as our own. Stay tuned for them. Lend your voice, time, and energy to them.

Denver residents, please check your weekly Epistle emails for a link or find a hard copy of the Vision for Denver card at the Sanctuary entrances. For the first time in 12 years, the most influential elected offices in Denver - from the mayor to key city council districts to the auditor - are up for election in open races with no incumbents. This means that over the next few months, we have a once-in-a-decade opportunity to shape the future of our city and center issues of human dignity. So that one day we have a community that “prioritizes care over punishment, healthy air and water, housing that we can all afford, and a Denver where everyone belongs no matter where we’re from.” Augustana is joining with other faith communities – Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, and more – across the city to advocate for Together Colorado’s Vision for Denver. The Human Dignity Delegates hope for over 100 responses from Augustana to join the thousands of others to come. Like I said a few weeks ago, everyone can’t do everything but some of us can do one thing.

Christianity is a faith that expanded from God’s promise to the Jews to include the rest of the world. God promises to be with us today and forever. The eternal part of the promise frees us from our fear while today’s part of the promise invites us into God’s love for the world through Jesus. The promises are more than symbolic. The promises come through Jesus in whom we live and move and have our being.

Jesus, the Lamb of God who brings us to God.

Jesus, the Son of God who reveals the face of God and created us in the image of God.

Jesus, the Rabbi who invites our participation in the ministry of God.

Jesus, the Messiah who inspires us to work towards the messianic hope of peace.

Thanks be to God. And amen.