

A Handful of Names

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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John 1:29-42

John was baptizing in the wilderness. Ordinary people wondered if he were the Messiah. Official people came to make inquiries. He told them all, No. But he also hinted that the Messiah was in their midst.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and he said, “Look! God’s lamb, who takes away the world’s sin. This is the one about whom I said, *Behind me comes a man who is now ahead of me because he was before me.* I myself didn’t know him. But I came baptizing with water so that he would be revealed to Israel.”

John testified, “I have seen the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove. And it remained on him. I myself didn’t know this. But the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, *The one upon whom you see the Spirit come down and remain — he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.* I myself have seen and I have testified that he is God’s son.”

The next day John was standing again with two of his disciples. He watched Jesus walk by, and he said, “Look! God’s lamb.” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed after Jesus.

When Jesus turned around and saw them following after him, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which means *teacher*), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” So they went and saw where he was staying. And they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon.

Simon Peter’s brother Andrew was one of the two who heard John and followed after Jesus. Right away he found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means *anointed one*). Then he took him to Jesus. When Jesus saw him, he said, “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Kepha” (which means *rock*).

Sermon

More than twenty years ago, I learned how to preach. There were rules to obey, guidelines to follow, and traditions to keep. Over the years I suppose I’ve broken as many rules as I’ve kept. But one rule I have always tried to keep is this: *Preaching is about Jesus.* That could be called the Prime Directive of preaching. I won’t deny that I’ve fudged on that from time to time. Not that I’ve ignored Jesus. But on certain occasions and with certain biblical texts, the challenge to keep the focus on Jesus is significant. And I’ve not always been up to that challenge. It’s another story altogether with today’s Gospel reading. The reading is all about Jesus, about Jesus and a series of names he is given. For a little while, I want to listen with you to those names. Jesus is called, “God’s lamb.” He is called, “God’s son.” He is called, “Rabbi.” And he is called, “Messiah.”

Each of those names is a window; through those windows we see who Jesus is. To begin with, according to John the Baptist, Jesus is “God’s lamb.” John himself explains that name. God’s lamb, he says, “takes away the world’s sin.” Jesus is the one who will deal with the great corruption and disruption of humanity. The world is not the way it’s supposed to be. We are not the way we’re supposed to be. Borders are lines in the sand. Cities are hangouts for danger and despair. Homes are monuments to greed. Church buildings are echo-chambers for insincere praise. But God’s lamb takes all that and more away. He takes it away! That’s what John says. I wonder what that means, though, especially when you can see sin in every direction, even when you look inside.

According to John, Jesus is also “God’s son.” I said last week that Israel’s king was called God’s son. That’s what John is saying about Jesus, that he is Israel’s king. Kings were anointed by God’s holy priests. Jesus was anointed by God’s Holy Spirit. Kings reign by the power of the sword, by soldiers and by chariots. Kings send their armies to the north and to the south to conquer and to rule. Jesus, however, will send the Holy Spirit. He will not rule by bloodshed and by the threat of violence. He will rule by the transforming power of the Spirit. Like the wind, the Spirit will blow to the north and to the south. Stalks of barley and towering cedars will yield to the wind. People will change. The world will change. I wonder, though, why so much looks the same as always.

According to two of John’s disciples, Jesus is a “Rabbi.” The gospel itself gives us a translation. A rabbi is a teacher. Not a teacher you meet with for a few hours a day in a classroom. But a teacher you eat with, sleep with, and follow through the world. A teacher you become so intimate with, so in tune with, that everything changes. Each of the gospels clearly portrays Jesus as a teacher. He has his students (disciples) who stick fast to him day after day. He has lessons for them: discourses, stories, and questions. And he takes them on field trips to watch history being made. Jesus is a rabbi, a teacher. I wonder what that means, though, especially when we all have so much to learn.

Finally, according to Andrew, Jesus is the “Messiah.” The gospel translates that, too. Messiah means anointed one, which unfortunately is something we still need to look up. We do use the word Messiah, thanks especially to Handel. And we use its Greek equivalent, Christ. But we use both of those words as a title, and the meaning remains obscure. In first century Judea and Galilee, Messiah was more than a mere title. While the exact details varied from time to time and place to place, the general picture is clear enough. Messiah was the one God would send to put Israel back on top. Israel had fallen long and fallen hard from the days of Kings David and Solomon. Ever since, they had been trying to pick up the pieces. Messiah would put the broken pieces back together. Messiah would make Israel whole. And Israel’s enemies he would “dash into pieces.” Jesus, of course, turned out to be the Messiah. Not according to this picture, however. (Some rules and guidelines and traditions are meant to be broken.) But Messiah he was, and Messiah he is. I wonder what that means, though, especially when the world and his church are in so many pieces.

Here’s where I need to break, or at least bend, the *prime directive of preaching* — the rule that preaching is about Jesus. Jesus is not the only one to be given names in today’s Gospel reading. Did you notice what Jesus did when he met Simon? Right off the bat he gave him a new name: “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Kepha.” That little episode is about Jesus. It’s a demonstration of Jesus’ prescience. He knew that Simon would play a central role in the story soon to unfold. It’s a demonstration of Jesus’ authority. Parents give names. Rulers give names. God gives names. Jesus gives Simon a new name as an assertion of his authority. This little episode also connects Jesus to Adam. The other gospels and the Apostle Paul have their ways, sometimes explicit, of connecting Jesus to Adam. I have a hunch that John may be doing the same thing here. The first thing Adam does in Genesis is to give out names. The first thing that Jesus does in John’s gospel is to give Simon a new name.

And what a name he gives him! Kepha. Rock. We know about that name. Muscle-bound boxers and wrestlers are called The Rock and Rocky. Impregnable fortresses and escape-proof prisons are called Rock. We know that when life comes at you too fast even for Nationwide at your side, you can always get a piece of the rock. We know about Plymouth Rock. We know about Ayers Rock. We know about the Rocky Mountains. We know about rock solid, rock steady, and rock bottom. We know about bedrock. This is a substantial name given to Simon. Kepha. Rock.

Here’s what I think is important for us to see. Simon (we’re used to calling him Peter, which is Greek for rock) stands in for the church, for all those who follow Jesus in faith. He will stumble and fall, but Jesus will lift him up. And he will become, by God’s grace, a pillar of rock, a key foundation stone of Christ’s church. Simon Peter will follow Jesus to the end of his days. He will lead the church. He will

call the church to faithfulness as “living stones,” as little rocks, each one of us. Simon will carry on the work for which Jesus was anointed, going all the way to his own death on a Roman cross.

And he will call us, the church, to continue that work. Not to be the world’s savior, but nonetheless to confront sin, in ourselves and around us, not giving a free pass to the powerful. To continue that work. Not to be God’s son, but to be God’s children, led by the Spirit, reshaping the world. To continue that work. Not to be the chief rabbi, but to teach nevertheless, to speak truth to hearts that prefer lies. To continue that work. Not to be the Messiah, but to share in his anointing. To pick up the pieces. To be servants to the bruised, to the battered, to the broken. To serve on a truancy board. To tutor an at-risk child. To visit an old woman or a sick friend. To be someone solid, to be something solid, when hearts and homes and neighborhoods are falling apart. To be a rock, because that is a foundational name for the church.

I’m still learning how to preach. There are rules I still haven’t learned. I hope you will bear with me in that, and also as I try to discover what it means to be a rock. That, too, is nothing I am naturally. Maybe none of us are. But by God’s grace and Spirit, it can become more than just a name. A living reality.