

“A Curious Start”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

John 1:19-34

January 7, 2018 - Baptism of the Lord

I don't usually like to start the sermon with “Previously, on Edgewood Presbyterian Sunday Worship...,” but I need to tell you about last week's Sermon from the Steps. I reminded the kids that it was the seventh day of Christmas, and that Epiphany was coming up at the end of the week. We decided that the stories of Christmas and Epiphany are populated by characters who are courageous and curious: Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, the shepherds, the magi, and even God. Courage — which Anne Lamott describes as simply “fear that has said its prayers” — and curiosity drive these stories and turn the world upside-down. We prayed for God to help us all spend 2018 being courageous and curious, living in faith and seeking to learn.

The Gospel of John has so much weird stuff in it, so it's not surprising that the introduction of Jesus in the gospel is curious. John starts with those words we read on Christmas Eve: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” We get that this whole book is going to be about this Word, who is Jesus. And it goes on about the Word and the light and then flows right into the passage I just read, with John the Baptizer encountering a bunch of very curious inquisitors from Jerusalem.

The Jewish leaders there have heard about John preaching and witnessing and baptizing and so they've sent these guys to investigate and ask a bunch of questions.

“Who are you?” they want to know. He knows what they really want to know — is he calling himself the anointed one? “I am not the Messiah.”

“Okay...are you Elijah?” No.

“The prophet like Moses that some have waited for?” No.

“Look, John, we can't go back without some answers. We've got to know. Who are you, then? If you're not claiming to be the Christ or Elijah or another great prophet, just who *are* you claiming to be? Who are you? What do you say about yourself?”

Who are you? What do you say about yourself?

When I told the kids that I wanted a curious 2018, I didn't mean that any of the questions would cut so deep or force introspection, but I can't help but get caught on “Who are you?” and “What do you say about yourself?”

I feel these questions boring into my heart. These are questions you get on job interviews and first dates, but in neither of those circumstances are most of us caught off-guard or, strictly speaking, prepared to be completely honest. But here, with the Word of God in the picture, on the banks of the Jordan, in a new year, these questions seem weightier and John and the priests fade into the background and I wonder, “Who am I? And what do I say about myself?”

You know people who seem so sure about who they are and know exactly what to say about themselves. These people drive me nuts. They're the same people who don't ever take a bad picture and have never eaten an entire bag of chips in their pajamas and haven't left the house wearing mismatched shoes and don't ever lie awake at night freaking out about the future. These people make me twitch because I don't understand them and I'm jealous and I can't relate and relating to people is kind of literally my full-time job.

For the rest of us, being asked who we are and what we say about ourselves gives us an un-peaceful, uneasy feeling. There are days when we can declare an answer boldly and definitively, but they are far too few and far between. Trying to tell you who I am only raises more questions that all intersect with whatever stress and anxiety I'm carrying around that day.

I am a pastor. I am a husband. I am a friend. I am a hard-worker. I am a procrastinator, unless it affects someone else, and then I'm an over-preparer. I'm a nerd. I'm a New Yorker. I'm an Alabamian. And there are days when I'm not very good at any of the above, and so I struggle to claim them and I worry, and then I worry that I'm too self-absorbed.

Who are you? What do you say about yourself? We are being asked to decipher what defines us. Is it our job — past, present, or future? Is it our failings — how we've let others and ourselves down? Do our successes define us? Our relationships? Maybe it's the number of followers and retweets we have.

Are we defined by how we think others see us? Maybe it's about whether we're thin or heavy or our hair or skin or how our bodies do or don't work compared to other people. Or maybe we're defined by how much existential angst we can find in a verse from the Bible?

I've pushed on the anxiety about these questions. But pondering identity is truly a vital part of how we twenty-first century humans make sense of our world. Figuring out who we are might seem frivolous to our ancestors if they could see us today, but such is the gift of technology and leisure and a much deeper understanding of psychology and the human brain. We understand how identity makes a difference in our world. Thanks be to God, more and more places of worship every day are seeking to love and embrace and ask for leadership from people whose answers to the question "Who are you?" would be unacceptable in the congregations we are leaving behind.

I'm aware that these questions - *Who are you?* and *What do you say about yourself?* were not asked of us, but of John the Baptist. But I think his response is instructive. He says: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" The inquisitors are confused. They want to know why he's baptizing if he's not the Christ, Elijah, or the prophet. And he tells them more plainly that there's another, and that he, John, is here to tell about that one.

They want to know who John is — what John says about himself — and he points. He points to the one who will follow, and then on the next day, Jesus actually shows up, and John keeps pointing. John is saying "I am testifying that this one baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and is the Son of God." If you want to know who John the Baptist is, you need to turn and behold this one and then you will begin to understand. He points to Jesus and says "Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

We began a new church year in Advent, preparing for the arrival of Christ. And with Christmas, we celebrated God's incarnation in our world, and with Epiphany, the revelation of the cosmic spinal adjustment that has occurred. Now we have about six weeks before we enter the season of Lent. In this time, and then in that season, we'll meet the Jesus of the Gospel of John. And then we'll find ourselves again at a supper with the shadows of betrayal and conspiracy and mockery gathering like fog in a valley.

In response to this big dramatic story of holy questions and sacred courage, we have ourselves and for one another, stated clearly “I’m a follower of Jesus Christ. Him. That one. The one I point to with not just my arm and not just my chin, but with all that I am and all that I can tell you about myself. I am his follower. That’s who I am. I am a beloved child of God.”

In the waters of baptism we have been washed and refreshed and anointed and blessed by the Spirit and — though we forget it often — we have known precisely who we are.

I’m a beloved child of God, and I’m a pastor and a husband and a friend.

You are a beloved child of God, and you are all the weird and wondrous and wonderful identities you are.

Now, I’m not suggesting that on your next job interview, or first date, or when meeting a new friend at the Piggly Wiggly, that you should lead with “I’m a beloved child of God!” But I’m also not saying you shouldn’t. In truth, saying that out loud might make you seem a little eccentric, but so might living your life according to what this Jesus guy taught.

In the water, we mark with an outward sign what God has already done: called you beloved, called you child, called you perfect, called you God’s own. No existential angst, ad campaign, or put down can take that from you. No screaming match with one you trust not to hurt you, no screwup, no calamity, no valley of the shadow of death can change what God has done.

When you are asked — and when you ask yourself — who you are and what you say about yourself, be honest, even if you need to reinterpret the exact words for your audience. In all that you do, seek to testify to the one you follow — the Word of God, the true vine, the way, the truth, and the life, the light of the world, the bread of life, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.