
What Are You Looking For? An Uncivilized King? Or the Savior of the World

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A**

*“Jesus turned and saw them following,
and Jesus said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’” -John 1:38*

At some point, many years ago, a strange little joke magnet appeared in the kitchen of my house, on the metal rack that keeps our pots and pans, above the counter. I don't know how the little joke got there; maybe my children put it there. Maybe my wife, Boog, put it there. But it says this:

“I FOUND JESUS!”
“HE WAS BEHIND THE SOFA THE WHOLE TIME!”

I think of these lines whenever I hear the last twenty-two verses of the first chapter of John's gospel. Our gospel this morning is part of that passage, John 1:29-51. But by my count, in these mere twenty-two verses, there are also at least thirteen different ways that Jesus is described, at least thirteen various titles for Jesus. What were they? *Lamb of God. The One who takes away the sin of the world. The one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. The Son of God. Rabbi, which needs translation as Teacher. The Messiah, which needs translation as Anointed. The One whom Moses and the prophets wrote about. Jesus. The son of Joseph. The King of Israel.* And, finally, at the very end: *The Son of Man.*

For those of us with a long history in our Christian tradition, we have been conditioned to presume that all these titles mean the same thing. In our heads, we just turn on the religion switch; and the words just all run together when we think of Jesus: he is Lord and Savior, and King and Lamb of God, and everything else.

However, here's the thing: In the first century, those titles did not always mean the same thing. The Lamb of God, someone who takes away the sin of the world, is not necessarily the same as the Messiah. The King of Israel is certainly not the same thing as the Lamb of God, because a king would certainly not submit to being sacrificed. And how could the Son of God be the same thing as the Son of Man? Yet, in these mere twenty-two verses, all these titles – and more—are used to refer to one man, this new presence in Galilee, this Jesus of Nazareth.

Like us today, every one of the early disciples of Jesus was looking for something, but they were not all looking for the same thing! What were they looking for? Some were looking to have sins forgiven. Some were looking for a messiah. Some were looking for a wise teacher, someone who would fulfill their hopes and dreams. These were all the titles they gave to their hopes.

John the Baptist was calling for repentance and looking for someone who could take away the sin. He would title that person the Lamb of God. John the Baptist was also looking for the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, who would fill the world with divine energy. He was looking for the person on whom the Spirit of God would descend. When he saw Jesus, seeing the answer to his hopes, he gave Jesus those titles. And, then, it seems he called Jesus the Son of God. That is still another title!

The next day, he declared to two of his own disciples: “Behold the Lamb of God.” But they addressed Jesus as “Rabbi” (a rather new word in those days), which is to say, “Teacher.” They wanted a teacher, maybe a wise sage, who could lead with deep wisdom and courage.

"Where are you staying?" asked those disciples, as if they wanted to reside with that wisdom. Jesus replied, "Come and see." Without knowing where they were going, the disciples followed.

One of those two was Andrew. He was looking for something else, too. So, when he found his brother, Simon Peter, he gave Jesus still another title. He told Peter that they had found "The Messiah," which is to say, "The Anointed." Keep in mind that this is a very different sort of title than Lamb of God, or Baptizer in the Spirit, or Rabbi. The Messiah, or Anointed one, was to be a gifted one, perhaps a charismatic figure. There are other titles; Nathanael calls Jesus the King of Israel, maybe the one to bring political unity to the country. Then, at the very end of the passage, Jesus himself speaks. How does he refer to himself? As "the Son of Man," "upon whom the angels of God are ascending and descending." All these titles appear in a mere twenty-two verses of scripture, in the first chapter of John.

What are you looking for? Like those earliest disciples of Jesus, we are all following different hopes and dreams; and maybe each of our individual hopes has fulfillment in Jesus! But there is probably no one, master, image of Jesus. Each of us sees Jesus primarily, at first, as a projection of what we have long been looking for. (I found Jesus! He was behind the sofa the whole time!)

Some of us, indeed, are looking for someone who has the power to forgive sins, to heal the guilt and shame we carry in our lives. We need that Lamb of God. Others of us are looking for the One who was written about in our traditions; our very studies lead us, intellectually, to this Jesus. Some of us want a Master Teacher, a rabbi. Some of us are looking for a healer. Some of us are looking for a friend. Some of us are looking for the One who baptizes with fire and the Holy Spirit. We want to be spirited and inspired. As we remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. this weekend, some of us are looking for a prophet, for a proclaimer of social justice.

And some of us today, sadly, some of us, actually want a king! But, if we are meeting the true Jesus, every one of us will have our projection changed. Every one of us will have our expectation changed. Jesus accepts our titles, for the most part, and then changes what they mean.

Let's take, for instance, that title, "king," a title which Jesus actually was quite reluctant to accept. Kings could be authoritarian tyrants in those days, just like they can today. In ancient times, three thousand years ago, one way of settling disputes was to ruthlessly and violently exterminate the opposition. The phrase, "one of ours, all of yours," is an accurate way of describing violent retribution practices of long ago. Uncivilized kings ruled through terrorism.

But civilization changed that practice. Humanity learned how to be civilized, and we accepted a different kind of law. Maybe it started in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. But it certainly was expressed by the time of the Hebrews and the so-called Law of Moses. Justice was not meant to be mass extermination and unboundaried violence. Instead, said the law of Moses, justice was supposed to be proportionate. "An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth." Not "one's entire life for an eye." Throughout the civilized world, this principle has come to be known as *lex talionis*, the law of proportionate reciprocal justice. It was actually a progressive law in those days! Humanity got civilized.

So, today, if we want to be civilized, we will not follow the phrase, "one of ours, all of yours." That is the slogan of an uncivilized world.

Christians, however, go further. If we want to be Christian, if we want to follow Jesus, we go further. Jesus quite clearly said, "You have heard it said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 5:38-39). That is why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, who was himself unjustly treated, took it further. He would say, "The old law about an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind."

What are you looking for? An uncivilized king? Or are you looking for Jesus?

We gather in this place, the Cathedral of St. Philip, and in so many other good churches, because we are looking for Jesus. We have found Jesus as Lord and Savior. Yes, our projections and titles for this Jesus are not all the same. We see different images. My image of Jesus is not exactly the same as yours. It may be that none of us *alone* has that master image. But our images grow and expand. Our knowledge of Jesus grows, as he changes our projections and images!

I believe that this phenomenon, this variety of hopes, that actually grows and changes, is good and right. This phenomenon is the reason we can call Jesus the Savior, the Savior not just of me and my individual hopes, but the Savior of the entire world. The reason we call Jesus the savior of the world is because he does, indeed,

draw the world to himself, even when the world is searching for so many different things.

"What are you looking for! Come and see!"

When we come and see, the first thing we see in the church is the great variety of those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ. It is a diverse group of hopes which finds fulfillment in Jesus. In true Christian community, we realize that we are indeed different and diverse.

The second thing we see is Jesus. Yes, the second thing we see, in this gathered community of disciples, is a larger and more complete image of Jesus, the Christ. One of the great miracles of church life is that the larger identity of Jesus is gradually revealed the more we gather together, the more we speak, the more we minister to one another and to the world, the more we pray and worship.

The more we do those things, the more we practice that discipleship, the more a larger identity of Jesus is revealed -- to us and to the world. None of us has the complete image of Jesus by ourselves. The larger image of Jesus is revealed only as more and more diverse disciples gather around Jesus!

It was William Porcher DuBose, the dean of the School of Theology, at the University of the South, in 1912, who said, "Truth is not an individual thing; no one of us has all of it -- even all of it that is known. Truth is a corporate possession, and the knowledge of it is a corporate process." (from *Turning Points in My Life* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1912), p. 56, as quoted in Donald S. Armentrout, *A DuBose Reader* (University of the South, 1984) page xxvi).

And so it is, that the title Jesus most often uses for himself is "Son of Man." "Son of Humanity, Son of Adam, Daughter of Eve," as if Jesus truly does represent each and every one of us. Jesus truly does know the inner longings and desires of every one of us. He even knows those hopes and fears that we are unable to articulate.

"Come and see," says Jesus. Come and see who fulfills our deepest hopes and needs. Come and see where Jesus resides. He resides in us, the saints, the wide and diverse community of those who call ourselves Christians, those who have responded to the call to follow Jesus, and not to follow the world. He resides in each of us, because he is the savior of each of us. And, as our community grows, and as Jesus resides in so many diverse hopes and needs -- it is then, that Jesus is the savior of the whole world.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip