

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
26 December 2021

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
First Sunday after Christmas

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Embracing our Place in Jesus’ Presence”

Fifth sermon in the Advent / Christmas Series: *Setting the Table*

Matthew 2:1-12; John 1:19-34

New Revised Standard Version

Who are you?

If I’m asked this question while checking in somewhere, **Who are you?** (asked matter of factly) – the answer is simple: “Anne Scalfaro (S-c-a-l-f (as in frank) – a – r – o)

If I’m asked this question at True Food Kitchen or anywhere in Absecon, New Jersey – **And Who are you?** (asked with juicy sing-songy intrigue, as in “and *WHO* are *you*?”) – the answer is contextual to my relationship, “I’m Anne, Damon’s wife.”

If I’m asked this at a neighborhood association gathering – who are you? (asked with quick interest as if at a cocktail party) – the answer is locational, “I’m Anne; I live in the cedar shingle/red brick house across from Denison Park...”

If I’m asked this question at a hospital, it usually comes after a few other questions including,

“are you the patient’s daughter (or granddaughter)?” (no)
“physical therapist?” (no)
“delivery person of somekind?” (no) – **oh then, Who are you?** (asked quizzically and with confusion/suspicion) – the answer is : “I’m their pastor...”

If I’m asked this question at a professional conference when I’m on a panel discussion of leaders, a lot more is implied in the question – “**So, go around the table and tell us Who You Are**” – the answer is resume driven so that the people have some reason to believe that I have some kind of authority to be there: “I’m Rev. Anne Scalfaro, graduate of Harvard Divinity School, Senior Pastor, of Calvary Baptist Church of Denver, and co-author of *Hebrews: Preaching the Word.*”

If I’m asked this question in therapy or spiritual direction, “**who are you, really?**” (as in, who are you at your core?) – the answer is a sigh, as in “I have no idea...that’s why I’m here!”

Who are you? This three word question is at the core of our text today in John 1.

And I know what you're thinking. Anne...it's the day after Christmas...and I'm in a food coma, and I'm exhausted from entertaining extending family yesterday, or sad because I had to be alone, or peeved because I didn't get what I wanted for Christmas even though I dropped a bazillion hints....really, Pastor Anne – you should just be grateful that we are here at church today, so can we just keep things light? I'm not in the mood to explore some deep existential question of “who am I?”?!?!?

And I get it. Because who am I? I'm a pastor and it's the day after Christmas!! As I like to say, “*On Christmas Morn, Jesus is Born and Clergy are Worn.*”

So I get it. Really, I do. But it seems that the task of every day *after* Christmas is to figure out what this Good News means for our day to day lives. How does Emmanuel – God with us – shape our identity and understanding of ourselves? And how does it impact how we live in the world?

And our Narrative Lectionary helps us with this today by introducing us to John the Baptist in John 1. We are immediately reminded that the new born baby Jesus grows up to be a man. The incarnation means that Jesus took on the *fullness* of our human experience – including placing him in a family. A family that included his crazy cousin named John.

The image many of us have of John the Baptist comes from his memorable depictions in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matt 3:1-12; Mark 2:2-8; Luke 3:1-20). The a fiery prophet in the desert, who wears clothes made of camel's hair, eats grasshoppers and honey, and preaches a message of repentance, baptizing all who take his message to heart. The Baptist we find in John 1:19-34 is a bit different, however. His introduction says nothing about his dress, his food, his message of repentance, or his baptizing activity. He identifies himself as the ‘voice of the one crying out in the wilderness’ (quoting Isaiah) ‘the one paving the way for Jesus.’ Here, John the

Baptist is solely focused on his ‘testimony’ about Jesus.¹

The priests and Levites (who are sent by the Pharisees in Jerusalem) encounter John as he’s baptizing at the River Jordan and these smart, educated, “professional” religious authorities ask him, “Who are you?”

And he knows immediately what they are asking, and quickly says, “Oh no, I am NOT the Messiah.” Okay, so then, “Are you Elijah” and he says, “Nope, not him either.” Okay so then, “are you the prophet?” and he answers “No.” So then they ask again, “Who are you???”

Before we get into John, let’s look at why the religious authorities are asking him these questions. Who are the three figures they mistake him for and why?

The Messiah (the anointed one) is, of course, the Messiah of which we read about all throughout Advent, and he was promised to be a descendent of King David.

Elijah is one of two people in the Old Testament who doesn’t die; he is taken directly into heaven. And in the fourth chapter of the last book in the Old Testament – Malachi it says: “*See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day that the LORD comes.*” (Malachi 4:5-6). So many people in the first century actually expected Elijah to personally come back either to be the Messiah himself or introduce the Messiah.

And the final question is – are you the prophet? This reference to “prophet” goes back to the prediction in Deuteronomy 18:15-18: “*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers.*” Of course, the “me” in Deuteronomy is believed to be Moses.

So clearly, the religious authorities were waiting on someone, one of these promised figures to come and save them. They were very much like us...holding on to hope, longing for something / someone to come and make their situation, their life, their world better than it was. And when we really

¹ Gilberto Ruiz, “Commentary on John 1:19-34,” *Working Preacher* (29 Dec. 2013), accessed on Dec. 26, 2021 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/a-voice-in-the-wilderness/commentary-on-john-119-34-2>.

understand who these figures are...it makes sense why they so desperately wanted John to be one of them.

All three of these questions are not just about ancient figures from the Old Testament, they really embody deeper themes that speak to Life, and the people's desire for a Life-Giving Solution to their longings.²

By asking John if he's the Messiah they are essentially asking Are you the new David? Why did people want a new David? David's reign represented a system of government that semi-functioned. And they *really* wanted a political system that functioned. They wanted some kind of rule of law, order, justice, equity that wasn't a foreign empire, that was from within their own perspective and beliefs (or we might say today, their own political party); they wanted a ruling government that would not be oppressive but that would allow life to thrive.³ Who wouldn't want that?

And then, why would they want Elijah to come back? Well, Elijah was considered one of the greatest and most powerful prophets of his day. He was a healer for goodness sake! He fed the hungry;⁴ Elijah insured that even those who were down on their luck thrived, those who were ill and dying, poor and outcast, the lowest in society. He was revered for his compassion.

And finally, why would you want a new Moses? Well, think about it. Moses was instrumental in bringing liberation to his people. He carried their ancestors to freedom from enslavement – beginning a whole new chapter for them. He also represented one who brought a *definitive word* of the Lord. “What should we do? What's right? What's wrong?” Moses always had those answers, God spoke with Moses on mountaintops and through burning bushes – the people had a direct line of communication to God through Moses. He could answer their questions giving them direction for their lives.⁵

² Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker, “NL Podcast 475: A Voice in the Wilderness - Dec. 26, 2021,” *Working Preacher* (20 Dec. 2021), accessed on Dec. 26, 2021 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/475-a-voice-in-the-wilderness-dec-26-2021>.

³ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

⁴ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

⁵ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

And wow – do you see why the priests and Levites are asking John if he is one of these three people? We long for the same things. Life. In our divisive political climate, we long for life through just and equitable government and authority – heck...we'd just settle for a few compromises between parties here and there...people working together. And two years into a global pandemic, we long for Life, for an end to suffering and death and economic upheaval; we long for the ability to plan again. We long for systems that heal, cure, and protect. And how many of us want a clear and definitive 'word from the Lord' about what the next steps in our life should be? About what our purpose or the direction of our career, our church, or our country should be? What if we didn't need the Supreme Court but got direct answers from our Supreme Creator?⁶

You see, these are not just questions from the leaders about John the Baptist's identity...they are questions about the people's identity too...about how they understand themselves in relation to God and the world around

them...and what they longed for.

Ultimately the answer John gives is, "It's not me. I'm not the Life-giver...I'm just the Voice, the Witness, to the one who is the Life-giver." Then the next day, John points out the Life-Giver to the people saying, "Jesus is the one who delivers us from sin, not me; Jesus is the one who gives ultimate healing through defeating death, not me. Jesus is the one who has the Spirit within him, not me. Jesus is the one who loves unconditionally, even to the point of suffering and dying on a cross, not me." I am here to serve him.

You want someone who brings a definitive WORD of the Lord? Well, here he is – *this* man, Jesus. He speaks it, he embodies it: Do you remember the speech I just gave? "*In the beginning was the WORD and the WORD was with God, and the WORD was God...and what has come into being in him was Light, the and the Light was the LIFE of all people...*" (John 1). Jesus is THE WORD made flesh. Emmanuel (God-with-us).

⁶ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

The interesting thing about this whole passage is that Jesus is John's cousin. I wonder if John knew Jesus one way as they were running around as kids growing up – and gradually had to adjust his understanding of who Jesus was as they grew up. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall in those moments – *“oh maybe Jesus does have a leg up on me after all!”* But somehow by this point in the gospel, John knew that his identity had everything to do with who Jesus was – not just to him, but to the world.

Just as Jesus was always pointing past himself to God; John the Baptist is always pointing to Jesus, his testimony is not about his own life, it's about his life in relation to the life of the one that gave him life in the first place – his Creator, his cousin, the Christ. It's all such a mystery – but it makes sense that questions of identity would be mysterious. We are not one dimensional. We are complex. And if we are made in the divine image of God, and if God came to embody human form, then guess what? The identity of God, the identity of Christ, that's complex too.

But – while it may be complex from a theological perspective,

perhaps it's a bit simpler from a practical “how does this impact my life?” perspective. And for that, we turn to Matthew 2.

This text was not part of our Narrative Lectionary, but I added it because well, 'tis the season, and also because of the contrasting example it provides.

In Matthew, we have King Herod – who clearly knows enough about this baby Jesus that he is threatened by what this boy might mean for his power and authority – later he begins plotting to kill all boys under age 2 so as to rid himself of this threat. Not only does this say a lot about how fragile Herod's ego was and how unhealthily he handled any threat to his power (how threatening is a baby, after all?) but it also says a lot about how Herod ruled – by threat, by might, by overpowering...not EMPOWERING. In contrast, John the Baptist's role was all about being empowered by Jesus to find his own voice and be a part of his ministry; but Herod had no room for sharing power.

But the other contrasting example that is so powerful here, is that the magi represent the very first people to worship

Jesus, which is to say, to recognize that their posture before Jesus should be one of humility, reverence, bowing down, gazing at, looking to, and learning from.

Worship does not just mean saying nice things about God and Jesus and seeing ourselves as small in comparison to the divine. Worship means taking a moment – in our case, each week or more – to recognize that we have life because of God – and that we know how to live – because of Jesus. Worship helps pull us out of ourselves and our own issues and problems and reminds us that while those still exist, there's also this bigger thing out there...this bigger power and plan and universe. We are to be in service to others, not just in service to ourselves.

And of course, as you know, the magi are from the East. We are not sure what religion they are, but they certainly weren't priests or Levites or religious authorities in the Jewish faith. They were foreigners. And they were people who allowed wonder to guide their path, rather than the need for answers or certainty or power. And I think, because they were open to wherever their questions and

curiosity took them, they ended up in the presence of Jesus – and immediately knew to bow down. And not only that, listened and let their actions be different after this encounter. They ditch Plan A, and say 'we can't go back to Herod, and go with Plan B, 'we have to go home by another way.'

Wisdom comes in all forms – from all kinds of people and all kinds of traditions and all kinds of countries. And again – it's all part of the mystery of the WORD made FLESH and coming to dwell among us. God coming to earth as a human is not just for people who call themselves Christians. It is for all people. The whole world.

In different ways, both of these texts in John and Matthew remind us that in order to understand our true identity, we must first seek to understand the identity of Christ – the one who most ideally shows us who we are in God. Sometimes, like with John, we know the answers to who Jesus is and what he means for us and the world, and that helps us know our vocation or calling in life. John very clearly knew his life's work was to proclaim and pave the way for Jesus' ministry.

The magi's responses is a little less definitive, but just as impactful. I'm not sure they had a completely new direction or path in life because of their encounter with the Christ child, but they knew enough to know that their posture before him was one to be of humility and bowing, reverence and awe. Acknowledging the mystery of Life right before their eyes. They also gleaned enough from the Star that had led them there, and from the Child that had met their gaze, that they knew the next right step to take in life – which was to go home by another road.

This step was not a life-long career path or a huge theological shift in their belief system, perhaps. But it was an act of social justice, an act of protest, against a powerful ego-driven, fear-filled king who continued to inflict harm on his people. Their one action mattered. Not just to Jesus, but to the world. It bought Mary and Joseph a little time. Did it save everyone? Unfortunately not. Other little boys were massacred. But their action still made a difference.

At Christmas we ask (and sing), "What child is this? Who is this babe in a manger? Who is the Emmanuel?" But really, as we

ask that question, it should lead us to also ask – Who am I? Who are you? Who are we in relation to Emmanuel (God-with-us)?

There are so many ways to define our identity – many of which include the roles we play in relationship to others (spouse, partner, parent, friend) or the profession we're paid for. Very seldom do we answer this question in relation to our faith or as a means of affirming our truest core identity.

We find our true identity in relation to God – as revealed in Jesus.

You see, answering the question of **Who am I?** requires us first to answer the question, **Who is Jesus?**

Who are you? You are a beloved child of God, a disciple and follower of Jesus, a part of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Who am I? I am one that looks at the life of Jesus to find the answer to my questions about my life's purpose. I am to love God and love others. Even more, I am to love myself as if I believe that the Spirit of God is dwelling within me. When my identity is located in God's love, my purpose becomes

evident...to help as many people as possible come to know and experience that love – on a deep and impactful level.

We woke up this morning to news of Desmond Tutu's death at the age of 90. Tutu was an unparalleled voice of justice in our world – a teacher, an archbishop, an anti-apartheid leader, a Nobel Peace Prize-winner, a civil and human rights advocate, the chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “*a patriot without equal, a man of extraordinary intellect*” as the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said.⁷

But beyond all of his accomplishments on paper, the core identity of Tutu was summed up quite well, I think by the current archbishop of Cape Town and metropolitan of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, Thabo Makgoba, who said: “*Desmond Tutu's legacy is moral strength, moral courage and clarity. He felt with the people. In public and alone, he cried because he felt people's pain. And he laughed -- no, not just laughed, he cackled with delight when he*

shared their joy.”⁸ He was “*a man of integrity and invincibility against the forces of apartheid, yes, [but that is because] he was [first and foremost] tender and vulnerable in his compassion for those who had suffered oppression, injustice and violence under apartheid...*”⁹

Desmond Tutu exemplified integrity in his actions because he knew his identity was connected to the well-being of all people.

It is true, I believe, that when we truly believe that we are ALL beloved children of God – and when we work from that place of love in our little, everyday actions and in our big, life decisions, – then our identity becomes clearer. For those of us who are Christians, we get that example of identity from Jesus.

Whether we are more like John the Baptist, or the Magi, knowing who Jesus is and allowing ourselves to be on a life-long journey of continuing to discover who Jesus is...knowing our place at the Table in Jesus’

⁷ Todd Leopold, Larry Madowo and Jessie Yeung, “Desmond Tutu, anti-apartheid leader and voice of justice, dead at 90,” *CNN* (26 Dec. 2021), accessed on Dec. 26, 2021 at

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/26/africa/desmond-tutu-death-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁸ Leopold, Madowo and Yeung, *ibid*.

⁹ Leopold, Madowo and Yeung, *ibid*.

presence...indeed, truly
 embracing our place in Jesus'
 presence helps us discover who
 we are – whether pointing him
 out to others out loud with
 proclamation, or bowing down
 in quiet reverence in a still,
 quiet moment in our home.

We are Beloved Children of
 God. Followers of Jesus. Divine
 image bearers of our Creator.
 Singers of the Spirit's Song.
 People who Love and let
 ourselves be loved. People who
 ensure others are loved too.
 Justice makers who bring back
 pathways to life where life is
 oppressed. Servants. Peace-
 makers. Disciples. Children of
 the Light.

None of these identities require
 us to prove anything to anyone.
 They are not resume builders.
 They require no proof of
 identification other than the
 stamp of our creator on our
 heart. Rather they are Life-
 Giving markers of identify and
 purpose.

My prayer for all of us this
 Christmas is that we embrace
 place in Jesus' presence –
 whether that's by the manger, or
 on the long and winding road
 following a star and a stirring in
 the darkness, or preaching and
 proclaiming and pointing by the

banks of the River Jordan –
 answering people's questions
 about our lives by pointing to
 the one who gave us life at our
 birth and who promises us life
 eternal through his resurrection.

In these days right after
 Christmas, as you wonder what
 to do with the Good News: Yes,
 Go Tell It on the Mountain! And
 – make sure you take time to
 Embrace it and Believe it for
 yourself too!

Amen.