

Dranesville UMC, Sunday, April 6, 2025

Who Do You Say that I Am?

John 12:1-8

12 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. 3 Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 5 "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." 6 He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. 7 "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. 8 You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

We're doing a Lenten sermon series based on Adam Hamilton's study "The Message of Jesus." In the study, we're asked to address the question, Who Do You Say that Jesus Is?

The first three gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—answer it by claiming Jesus as the Messiah. However, the Gospel of John asks a broader question: Is Jesus God? John 1:1: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. How did John arrive at this statement? We need to look at the Hebrew Bible to know the basis of John 1:1.

There's a remarkable story in Exodus 3 in which Moses first encounters the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The story describes Moses driving his father-in-law's flock to the far end of the wilderness and coming to Horeb, the mountain of God. It's a poetically pregnant phrase where, once the great prince of Egypt is now in a lowly state, tending someone else's flock and roaming in the far corner of the wilderness. He's not expecting to meet the God of his forefathers. He's trying to make ends meet, perhaps wanting to find green pastures, or perhaps trying to hide from his shame. But that's where God meets him.

You know the story. God appears to him in a small flame in a bush—a tiny flicker. If it weren't for Moses' sharp eyes, it would have been ignored. But the unusual sight piqued his interest. He turned to check out this strange flame. Then, all of a sudden, Moses realized he was

encountering this ancient God he thought was only a legend. He found himself standing on sacred ground. He was given a new purpose for life. He was reminded that he wasn't forgotten. Then Moses does something particular: he asks for God's name. In response, God declares something very enigmatic, confounding, and obscure: I Am That I Am!

I read that passage before as a teenager. I didn't take notice. I never heard a sermon on it before. But when I got to seminary, it was the central passage for the Pentateuch class. I remember the professor tried to explain it, but it fell short. It didn't even convince himself. With much candor, he confessed it was not really clear to him.

That made me think about it over all these years. The phrase God spoke in that far back corner of the wilderness, I Am That I Am, means God is existence. God is integrated into the present reality we call life, reality, and the universe.

That's the theology reflected in John 1: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

John uses a special word, Logos, which is translated as the Word. The concept of Logos was Greek, and it evolved over time, starting with Socrates as logic. Later on, Stoics believed Logos was a divine, rational force that permeated all of nature and governed the universe. John took this Grecian idea and applied it to Jesus as the Logos. In other words, Jesus is I Am That I Am.

But Jesus is not some ubiquitous being. Jesus is concrete, practical, and relevant. The Gospel of John goes on to describe Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He is the Bread of Life. He is the Light of the World. He is the True Vine. It's like the poem How Do I Love Thee? by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The Gospel of John conveys this immense and astounding revelation into every day, practical, and palpable concepts so that the people of God can truly appreciate God.

After two thousand years of church history, most Christians accept Jesus as the Messiah and as God eternal. Today, there's a more relevant and personal question that we're always asking. It percolates all the time in our souls. We ask, how is Jesus to us in ways that are truly endearing to our soul?

The passage we read from John answers this question. It tells us who Jesus was to Mary, His "I Am" to her. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus with costly perfume. In today's worth, it would cost nearly \$100K.

There are three different levels of meaning going on. On one level, Mary expresses her gratitude for receiving back the life of her brother Lazarus. Jesus brought him back from death. On a second level, Jesus views her action as an anointing to prepare him for his crucifixion and burial.

On a third level, this passage addresses what Judas hinted about Jesus. When he said, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?” symbolically, he represents those who question the legacy Jesus had on the world. Did His life have a meaningful impact? After all, he could have cured all diseases, eradicated hunger, and disposed of all authoritarian and cruel leaders. But he died as a vile criminal on the cross. What a waste, the critics of Christianity say.

However, this story presents Mary’s perspective. This overwhelming Logos, the all-encompassing God who manifests on earth as the Son of God, the Bread from Heaven, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the True Vine, the Good Shepherd—for Mary, they all point to God’s overflowing love for us. More importantly, they point to Jesus’ devotion to her.

For her, the death on the cross is not a waste. It’s not a failed quest for Messianic claim. His life could NOT have been greater or even more impactful. His life was a devoted, tender act of love for the world, for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.

Mary finally comprehended what Moses couldn’t. Mary understood the impact of Jesus’ life. She wanted to show her appreciation. In some way, she wanted to match the magnitude of God’s devotion to us by obtaining the most expensive perfume. But knowing it wouldn’t suffice, she chose to anoint his feet—the lowest part of his body—and she used the highest and greatest pride of her beauty, her hair, to wipe them with utter devotion.

Who do you say that I Am? Mary says the Logos, the great I Am, the one who expressed the most tender love for us and for me. Therefore, she anointed him with expensive perfume. She knew how precious He was to her and to the world. Who do you say that I Am? Mary said, “You’re the most gracious sacrificial love.”

As you know, one of our members, Darla, was admitted to the hospital yesterday. She and her husband Pete were at a medical event known as Amyloidosis (am-uh-loi-DO-sis) convention. It’s a rare disease that Pete has.

They were having lunch at the event when Darla felt ill—and that was the fortuitous event. When her heart stopped and she stopped breathing, three cardiologists and six nurses surrounded her. They performed CPR and applied an AED device to get her heart to beat again.

Thank goodness God heals through prayers, love, and medical professionals. She was in good hands. The nurses and medical staff at Fairfax Hospital were compassionate, kind, and very attentive. They figured out that she didn't have a heart attack or suffer from a stroke. They determined she should be moved to the Intensive Care Unit.

After she was moved, Darla was awake but couldn't talk. Pete held her hand as they communicated. He asked if she wanted her marriage ring back on her hand because he removed all her jewelry as soon as she got to the hospital.

She squeezed his hand to say yes. She lifted her wedding ring finger as if that was the most important thing, she wanted in all the world. As he put the ring on, they looked at each other with renewed love. That ring is a humble ring which Pete bought 57 years ago.

I asked Pete if I could share this story because, for Darla, that humble ring meant more than we could imagine. In a similar way, Mary understood Jesus' life so much more than what Judas thought of Jesus. So much more than what the early Christians thought. So much more than all the theologians combined because Jesus is more than the Messiah, the God of I Am That I Am, and all the I Am statements in John. Jesus loves her so dearly.

I pray that when we are asked, Who do you say Jesus is? we know the magnitude of that question. We understand the immensity of God. We appreciate Jesus' life. He is the ubiquitous Logos who chose to love us dearly, tenderly, carefully, and utterly. And we respond the same way Mary did two thousand years ago. We anoint him with our most precious oil and with our most honored self. Amen.

With kind regards,

Keith Lee

Pastor at www.dranesvilleumc.org

703-430-3137