

**Come and See, Come and Be**  
**John 1:35-51**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
**January 7, 2017**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**

Michael. Mike. Michael Dale. Dale Michaels. Professor K. Kirbles. Skeeter. Pastor. Father.

Mike — To this day, this is what my high school friends call me and sometimes what folks who remember Mike Youngblood call me here, which is perfectly fine, though I abandoned the short form of my name 35 years ago.

Michael Dale — My mother has used my full name when I was or am in trouble for most of my life. But my late aunt Sharlie, who loved how the two names sounded together, always called me both names every time she said my name.

Dale Michaels — This was my official radio license name when I was on commercial radio in Waco. That was what they required me to do since I was appearing under my own name on the Baylor radio station.

Professor K — My brother's friends, most of whom were high school athletes, called me this in both junior high and high school when they would call me over to their table in the lunchroom to answer questions from their homework.

Kirbles — In the drama club, we all had nicknames and to those friends, I was either Kirbles or Kirbles and Bits after the dog food.

Skeeter — Early in my career, I scored a few wins in appellate court with fairly novel legal arguments that were sort of out of left field that most people thought wouldn't work, and one of my partners said I was like a mosquito, buzzing around with my annoying weird arguments and then stinging. So, for the next four years some of my colleagues called me Skeeter.

Pastor — This is probably the nickname I hear the most these days.

Father — This is the default response when I'm wearing my collar outside of this church.

If each of us looks back over our lifetimes, I'm sure each of us has a similar series of names we've been called, hopefully all with positive memories attached to them. The names change over time. They fit who we are at a given time. Or, more importantly, since we don't usually choose them, they fit who people expect us to be or want us to be.

The power of naming can be both a positive thing and a difficult thing. When people first started calling me Father almost 15 years ago, I was always very quick to correct them. I was just getting comfortable with this whole pastor thing and didn't want to be misinterpreted. But now, whatever...

Today, in this passage from the first chapter of John, we cover two of the iconic events of Jesus' ministry — his identification by John the Baptist as the Messiah and the calling of the first disciples. But in telling these familiar stories, John does something else. Did you notice? In the middle of the passage Jesus gives Simon a new name — Cephas; he is Peter, the Rock. Jesus knows how important names can be.

And apparently so does John because did you notice the other thing going on with names here? "The Lamb of God!" "Rabbi," "the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed) — him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, "Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth," "Rabbi," "Son of God!" "King of Israel!" "the Son of Man." Ten different names in sixteen verses, here at the very beginning of his ministry, before he's performed a single miracle or preached a single sermon, he already has 10 names.

One of the things we are going to discover about the Book of John over the next few months is that it is a much more literarily aware book than the other gospels. Structure, foreshadowing, lots of literary devices are going to be used and here in this opening story we find one. John starts the gospel off with all of the names people had been using to describe what they were looking for, what they were hoping for — the one they were waiting for. And the one they got in Jesus, and it's a very wide spectrum, is Jesus, son of Joseph, all the way up to the Son of God, the King of Israel.

People are expecting a lot from their Messiah. Some want spiritual deliverance, some want political deliverance, some want a restoration of the kingdom of David, some want global domination. And what they want is reflected in the names they give the one they want to have power and influence. This is true, too, in the other gospel stories from this time of year. It is the angels who announce that Jesus will be called wonderful counselor, almighty God, prince of peace. Those names, like a lot of the names that John uses, are steeped in old testament tradition and the vision of God's deliverer — and who he would be.

But John is being a bit more provocative than the angels in Luke's gospel because, after the angel chorus disappears on Christmas night in Luke's gospel, almost no one calls Jesus those names ever again. Not so in John. John uses these names at the beginning, seemingly acknowledging that they have a lot of weight and power. And then he spends the rest of the gospel messing with people's understandings of those names.

Johannine Scholar Gail O'Day suggests that "As the Gospel narrative progresses, the titles from chapter 1 will be replaced, expanded, transformed, or redefined by Jesus' words and works and ultimately by his death and resurrection." O'Day then suggests that "the church needs to attend to this caution, because it sometimes acts as if it has answered the last question about Jesus' identity and arrived at the definitive title for him. ...Such absoluteness precludes fresh and vital calls to discipleship. The panoply of titles for Jesus in John 1 suggests that to insist on one name for Jesus is to miss the fullness of his identity."

And here is one of John's central themes. This Jesus, this God, is not who you expect him to be. He is more than you expect. He is more than you can imagine. And so John is saying that about God, too.

It is so easy to create God in our own image. Anne LaMotte has a great line about this. She's noticed that in the church, we easily fall into the trap of worshipping a God who hates the same things and the same people that we do; that we mold God, we edit Jesus down into being the Christ that we want him to be. For some he is the great judge of personal immorality. For some he is the great judge of community or corporate injustice. For some he is the gentle teacher with children gathered around him. For some he is the cosmic Christ, all knowing, all seeing. For some he is the valiant sufferer, subjected to torture by evil humanity. For some he is almost disembodied, a pure spirit, unconcerned with the humanness of our existence. For some he is God enfleshed, thus giving dignity and divine blessing to very human and physical things like eating, dancing and even sex. The reality is that at various moments in his life and ministry, Jesus is all these people — all of these visions of God, but never just that and always so much more.

It can be confusing and confounding and, for John, that's okay. And for Jesus it's the way into an invitation. Did you notice that other thing that is happening at the beginning and ending of these call stories of the first disciples? Their attention is drawn to him because of what others say. But his invitation is for them not to get caught up in the names and expectations, but to come and see, to come and find out for themselves who he is and what following him means.

The characters here at the beginning of John's gospel find what they're looking for in Jesus, even though they're looking for very different things. Again to quote O'Day, "The decision to be a disciple is inseparable from the decision one makes about Jesus' identity." Each of them sees their Messiah as slightly different, because each of them sees themselves as different. But here's the tricky part and the awesome part. What does Jesus do with all of these people with their different visions of who he is?

He calls them together. He makes of them a community, a community that has its roots in John's ministry of baptism; a community that will journey with him for three years and end up at a table in an upper room in Jerusalem. Their understanding of all of these names for Jesus will be very, very different in three years because together they will have experienced Jesus. They come and see and they grow in their understanding of who he is and how his message and his life changes each of them in a particular way, but also changes all of them together as they each bring those individual experiences together. And together they can have a vision, not the vision, but a vision about who Jesus is and who he wants them to be.

I want to suggest that it's still true. Jesus is still calling each of us to come and see, to follow, and in following to grow in our understanding of who we are and who this Jesus, son of Man, son of God, is — for each of us, for all of us, for the whole world.

And that invitation extends beyond congregation and denomination but to all who call upon his name, including some people we probably don't like or agree with very much, some who we think have got Jesus all wrong, or who are certain we have him all wrong.

John wants to remind us that Jesus invites all to come and see and he lets each of us see something different than one another. But surely that reminds us that we each have Jesus

just a bit wrong or maybe a lot wrong; that we each have our own visions of Jesus. That's okay. It's great actually, but we mustn't get stuck there and we mustn't be arrogant and prideful that our Jesus is the right Jesus and someone else's is the wrong. Come and see but don't stop there. Yes, we will disagree and try to argue it out and we are welcome to do that — but respectfully, lovingly, humbly. That's hard but it's part of our calling.

Today we reaffirm our baptismal identity; our calling by God into community. And we celebrate the Lord's Supper, the act by which Jesus united the disciples as he was leaving them. In these two sacraments we find a God greater than our understanding but a Christ who wants to keep some things very simple. I love you and you are mine — the promise of baptism. I give my very self, humanness and Godness, for you and all of humankind — the profound message of the welcome table. These are two messages that are very simple but greater, larger than we can ever fully comprehend. Messages that, at first at least, call us into being before they call us into doing, into being beloved, being claimed, being shaped for community.

And it is enough. It is enough to let the waters rush over us and experience God's love and grace and welcome. And it is enough to taste and see that the Lord is good and feeds us for the spiritual and physical lives we are called to lead, for surely that will come, the doing part. But for today can we today come and see and come and be?

What's in a name? A lot, but let the name of Jesus and all the ways we define him not be a cage into which we imprison God, but different facets of a jewel so great, so large that we can only perceive part of it, only stand in the reflected light of a small part of it's, of God's, greatness — knowing that the light that shines from it can and will reflect through us, so that others will want to come and see, so that others can find a place of welcome, a place where they can simply be and be beloved.

Thanks be to God. Amen.