

## Identity and Mission

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Scriptures: Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 89; Acts 10:34–38; Luke 3:15–22

One of the things that I had to get used to coming into a church tradition with a sacramental theology and a sense of the history of the Church was the practice of anointing. And one of my first experiences didn't exactly help me get comfortable with it.

I had been asked to give a presentation at a church gathering in the Atlanta area, mostly for people I did not know. As I was introduced, it was revealed that I would very soon be ordained to the diaconate. "Here's the new guy," basically. After the presentation, and I am sure meaning well, someone whom I did not know and to this day do not know, someone who as far as I know had no official designation to do this came up to me and gruffly said, "Here, let me anoint ya." As a native son of Georgia I can also say that every time I replay this memory in my head the Southern accent gets more and more thick. He then promptly continued, without asking I might add, to lick his finger and swipe it on my forehead. Yeah, not the best first experience being "anointed."

But thankfully, I grew to learn the rich and historic tradition of the Church's practice of anointing the sick, those who are baptized, and others. I've also grown to more greatly appreciate the rich practice of anointing in the Scriptures. It was an important act for the first Christians and it was an idea that greatly influenced how they thought about God's work in the world. Take for example what Peter says of

Jesus in our reading from Acts this morning: “you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God *anointed* Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.”<sup>1</sup> No, Peter is not claiming that Jesus was anointed with oil at his baptism, but he is showing us an understanding of God’s anointing that conveyed a special setting apart of a person for a particular role in leading God’s people.

This becomes clearer when we consider the role of anointing in the broader story of the people of Israel. What we find is that the language of anointing is used primarily to talk about the marking of an individual for one of three specific roles: prophet, priest, and king. This starts in the book of Exodus, chapter 28, among the instructions God gives Moses for building the Tabernacle. Moses is commanded to anoint Aaron and his sons as priests to serve there. Samuel, God’s prophet, is told to go out and anoint King Saul and King David, marking the unique way God had chosen each to serve as the civil ruler of his people. The prophet Elijah is told to go and anoint not only a king, but the prophet Elisha to serve in his place as prophet.<sup>2</sup>

This tri-fold form of leadership was a defining characteristic of Israelite society, and each represented a significant tier of God’s intended order for his people. When things were working as they should, the three worked in concert with one another, the king bringing civil order, the priests maintaining the proper worship of God, and the voice of the prophet telling them when they needed a course correction.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 10:37-38, emphasis mine

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 19:16

The importance of this anointing, or setting apart of these individuals for particular roles can be seen in the way the Scriptures talk about the Messiah. It may not be new to you, but it bears repeating, the name, Messiah, comes from the Hebrew word for the verb to anoint, so that the title Messiah means “anointed one.” This bit is not super on topic, but I think it is interesting, but Moses, the person who most closely embodies the three roles of prophet, priest and king before they are formally established, his name is very close to this word. Hebrew has two letters that we would call the letter H and Moses and Messiah have the same consonants with the only difference being that last letter. Moses has one of the Hebrew H sounds and Messiah has the other. It’s almost as if Moses is almost there, that we are to look for an even greater Anointed One.

But I digress. The Messiah then is this set apart one, this anointed one above the other anointed ones, and of course you can probably see where this is going, because as many of you know the title of Messiah, or Christ if you translate it into Greek is the title that is rightfully given to Jesus, proclaimed by Peter and many others throughout the Gospels.

And the title fits doesn’t it? Jesus is the better prophet, the better priest, the better king. Back when the people of Israel were demanding a king from among them, God says to Samuel that it is not Samuel they have rejected, but God himself. For in a rightly ordered world, God is the anointed King over Israel who needs no anointing.

And so this is the importance that Peter places on the moment of Jesus’ baptism when he is recounting it in Acts 10: “you yourselves know what happened

throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.”

No oil required. This was an anointing of a different order. God the Father anoints God the Son with God the Holy Spirit. A trinitarian moment that proclaims indeed that nothing could be more important, more earth-shaking than this, than what is about to happen in the life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. It may not be in a temple or a palace, but the Jordan River is at this moment the center of the universe.

Jesus’ baptism proclaims many things about him, but I want to focus on two: identity and calling. Notice I said that his baptism does not give him these things, for he does not enter the water lacking either his full divine nature or his mission to redeem the world, but they are proclaimed here for us in his act of obedience.

We hear of Jesus’ identity from the Father: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” How many children wish to hear this from their parents?” Jesus was clear about who he was, not least because he heard his Father’s word spoken over him. I don’t think it is a coincidence that it is right after Jesus’ baptism that Luke decides to insert his account of Jesus’ genealogy into his Gospel narrative. Luke wanted to be clear about who Jesus was, as clear as Jesus was himself about his own identity.

And from that place of a secure identity, because Jesus was deeply rooted in who the Father said he was, he was able to faithfully go on the mission his Father had for him. Last time we gathered together, we heard in our Gospel reading the tween Christ say that he *must* be in his Father's house. You may be familiar with the translation where he says he *must* be about his Father's business. Jesus gets to work after his baptism, encountering Satan in the wilderness in accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There was evil to contend with, and good had just played its winning move.

If you were to ask Jesus what his business was about, he would probably say something very close to our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 42. I say this because he does almost exactly that when he comes home to his hometown at the beginning of his ministry. After contending with Satan in the desert, Luke tells us that Jesus begins a synagogue teaching tour. And the first one we have recorded details about is in his hometown of Nazareth. You bring your A game when you are invited to preach at the place where you grew up. And Jesus does. He reads from the Isaiah scroll, chapter 61 which is a bit of a cousin text to our reading from Isaiah 42. First hear Jesus' reading of Isaiah 61 as told in Luke 4:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>3</sup>

Now hear again our reading from Isaiah 42: "I will give you as a covenant for the people,

a light for the nations,

to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,

from the prison those who sit in darkness."<sup>4</sup>

Do you hear how those two passages from Isaiah cast a theme over the work that Jesus had come to do? Good news to the poor. Light to blinded eyes. Prisoners out of their bondage. Just as sure as Jesus knew who he was, he knew what he had been sent here to do. And from that place of both a secure identity and a clear calling, he went and did it.

Who are you and what were you placed here to do? If you are like me you have perhaps had times in your life when the answers to those questions flowed easily from your mouth and you have also had times when not being sure of those very things caused you great pain and anxiety.

Here is the audacious claim that we as Christians make about our baptism: because of what Jesus has done, what is proclaimed over him at his baptism is also proclaimed over each one of us who has come to the waters of baptism. You are my

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:18-19

<sup>4</sup> Isa 42:6b-7

beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. These are the words spoken over us at the font.

This yearly remembrance we have in our church calendar of Jesus' baptism (celebrating a week late due to snow, of course) is an excellent opportunity for us to remember again that our basic identity, in our joining with Christ in his death and raising to life in baptism, is that of beloved children of God. We can be as secure in that identity as Jesus was in his.

The world has lots of ways in which it would label us. By the money that we make; by the way that we look or don't look, by what we do or do not have; by the thing we do for most of the day Monday to Friday. Increasingly, we are encouraged to focus solely on how we self identify, ignoring all other labels that others would put on us and solely depend on our own self for a sense of who we are.

But I think deep down we know the truth: the labels and categories of others and the ones we write for ourselves, they are far too fickle and incomplete to give us an abiding sense of who we are. They are incapable of providing firm ground. Our circumstances change. Our opinions and the opinions of others change. God's love doesn't change. His word spoken over us about who we are and why we are valuable in his eyes does not change.

We could spend a whole sermon series on the implication of that declaration at our baptism, "You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son." How many wounds do we have that can be healed by those words? If that pricks something in

you today, please don't ignore it. Surround yourself with the truth that you have a loving Father who delights in you.

And also, we are called out of that place of secure identity, just as Jesus was, on mission to the world for the sake of the Kingdom.

I think of those passages from Isaiah, how many times Jesus must have heard them growing up, prayed through them, and let them shape his imagination. They seem to be refrains that captured what he was all about. What refrains echo in your head? What are the driving motivations behind the work of your life?

Like with our identity, the world is ready to answer this question for us if we are not intentional about answering it ourselves. Work, other people, our own ambitions - all of these are happy to write our mission statements for us. Who is writing yours?

Remember that Abraham and Sarah were called out from among the nations *so that* they would be made into a nation of covenant people who would be a light to all nations. Remember that the Israelites were called out of slavery in Egypt *so that* they might come to God's mountain to worship him and to receive his law. Remember that Jesus came *so that* we might be saved.

Just like with our identity, the mission that drove Jesus' life is ours as well. And so if you are looking for a statement of that mission, Isaiah 42 is not a bad place to start: sight to the blind; prisoners out of darkness. We do not need to be under any illusions that we will be perfect in our pursuit of this mission, as Jesus was, but we



are nevertheless called to do what he asked of the first twelve to do: to follow him. It is only Jesus who is anointed as the true Prophet, Priest, and King. But we are too anointed at our baptism, to serve him in the ways that God has gifted us to serve.

And so we have in Christ the answers to two of the most universal and burning questions out there: who am I and why am I here? In our baptism we receive both, that same identity and mission that were proclaimed over Jesus. We are God's beloved children. We are called to a life on mission for the Kingdom. And that my brothers and sisters, is good news.