

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

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## **My Cause is with the Lord**

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Beloved siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What stands out to me in today's Gospel reading from John is that it is not primarily about baptism, at least not in the way the other Gospels present it. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is a vivid depiction of Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan River. However, in John's Gospel, the baptism has already occurred. John the Baptist speaks in the past tense: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him."

The Gospel of John emphasizes different priorities, which become evident through its language. In today's reading, which spans only 13 verses, the concepts of seeing and witnessing appear 14 times. Let us pause for a moment and whisper together the word "see" to truly feel its weight and presence. John observes Jesus approaching, describes seeing the Spirit descend, and instructs others to "Look!" Jesus asks the disciples, "What are you looking for?" and then invites them to "Come and see."

The word "see" occurs 75 times in the Gospel of John, more often than in all but three other books of the Bible. This Gospel is deeply concerned with witnessing, seeing, and testimony. This emphasis reveals a profound truth: our cause, our work, our struggle, and our lives are rooted in what we have witnessed God doing.

Jesus' initial words to the curious disciples were not a theological statement or a command, but rather an invitation: "Come and see." He invites them to witness what God is accomplishing and to experience it personally. Once someone has seen and encountered this, remaining silent becomes impossible.

Yet, bearing witness to God's work is not always simple. Sometimes, it feels as if there is nothing to witness. We may find ourselves, as the Psalmist describes, in 'the desolate pit' or struggling through 'the miry bog.' Today, these desolate pits can

manifest as housing discrimination, where families fear eviction without just cause; as migrant detention centers, where individuals seeking refuge are unjustly confined; or as inequitable healthcare access, forcing many to choose between basic health needs and other essential expenses.

Many of us know what it is like when life feels like thick mud clinging to our feet, making each step exhausting. I, too, feel the mud on my own boots and the heaviness that weighs down my spirit as I strive forward. Injustice persists, uncertainty clouds the future, and our efforts can seem futile, as if we are laboring in vain and expending strength for nothing.

A more precise translation of the opening of Psalm 40 is not “I waited patiently for the Lord,” but rather “I waited and waited” (Psalm 40:1 Hebrew Text Analysis, n.d.). This conveys a sense of prolonged waiting, uncertainty about whether it will ever end, and concern that hope may never return. To grasp the depth of this waiting, we can reflect on the decades-long struggle for civil rights or the ongoing efforts against climate change, which often span lifetimes. Connecting the Hebrew nuance to these real timelines deepens our understanding of patience and perseverance amid extended trials.

Traditional interpretations of this Psalm often suggest that the solution is to trust in God’s overwhelming power, envisioning God as so mighty and dominant that God will overcome any opposing force. However, this perspective risks portraying God as merely another dominating power, implying that trust in God requires believing that God will simply overpower oppressors.

But what if that’s not what trust in God looks like at all?

What if having our “cause with the Lord” means something different? What if it means waiting for the fruits of living God’s way to appear, and refusing to live differently, even when those seeds haven’t sprouted yet? Even when it seems they may never sprout. Even when we watch others choose a more comfortable path and reap individual benefits.

This form of trust does not guarantee material outcomes such as wealth, safety, or success. Instead, it offers something more significant and sustaining. When God ultimately lifts individuals from despair, it is not solely for their benefit. God

provides a “new song,” a testimony that enables others to recognize God’s work. Thus, one’s liberation becomes a source of hope for others.

This leads us to Isaiah’s vision of the Suffering Servant. Many Christians instinctively interpret these passages as referring to Jesus, and indeed, Jesus’ early followers found inspiration and meaning in them. However, we must approach these texts with care.

First, interpreting these songs exclusively as predictions of Jesus risks disrespecting Jewish communities by reducing their scripture to a mere precursor of Christianity. Second, and perhaps more importantly for us today, this approach can limit the radical implications of Isaiah’s message.

Isaiah is writing to Israel during the Babylonian exile. God’s people are oppressed, defeated, and wondering if they’ll ever see home again. And into that despair, Isaiah offers a revolutionary prophecy: You are not waiting for someone to come save you. You ARE the servant. Your struggle IS the glorification of God.

The Servant in these songs laments, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” Sound familiar? It’s the same cry we hear in Psalm 40. But then comes the turning point: “Yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.”

The term translated as “reward,” *p’ullah* in Hebrew, can also mean “work” or “labor.” Thus, the text suggests that one’s cause and work are with God. The struggle itself, the ongoing labor for liberation, constitutes the glorification of God.

Liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría understood this. He wrote that “the act of liberation is glorification of God.” Not suffering. Not redemptive sacrifice. But the struggle for life, that is what glorifies God. (Ellacuría, 1986, pp. 22-24)

This distinction is crucial, as Christianity has frequently glorified suffering itself, particularly the suffering of the oppressed. Womanist theologian Delores Williams cautions: “Black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred.” (Work, 2025)

Therefore, when we read about the Suffering Servant, we are not reading about a God who demands suffering. Instead, we encounter themes of self-emancipation and collective liberation. This is a God who does not intervene from above, but

works from below, within and among the oppressed, empowering them to become their own liberators.

Our cause is with a God who is “Down to Earth.” A God whose invitation to liberation is gentle, even as the call is demanding.

The various titles in today’s Gospel warrant additional consideration. John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the “Lamb of God” twice and also as the “Son of God.” Andrew calls him “Messiah,” the Anointed One, while the disciples initially address him as “Rabbi,” or teacher.

Beginning with the title “Lamb of God,” it is important to note a discomfort with sacrificial atonement theory, the notion that Jesus died to satisfy God’s desire for sacrifice. However, this does not appear to be John’s intended meaning when he proclaims, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

It is significant that the text refers to “sin” in the singular, not “sins” in the plural. John’s Gospel consistently addresses the condition of sin rather than individual transgressions. Jesus removes the barriers that separate individuals from God and from one another. Jesus demonstrates “how to live as we were created to live; out of a love that centers the other rather than the self.”

The theological significance of the title “Lamb of God” does not center on blood sacrifice. Instead, it concerns the willingness to lay down one’s life, not to appease an angry God, but to reveal an alternative way of being human in community. Jesus’ death results from living in this manner within a world dominated by oppressive powers, rather than as a divine requirement.

And “Messiah”? “Anointed One”? In the Hebrew Bible, anointed ones were priests and kings set apart for service, for leading, for a cause. We too are set apart for a cause. Not to dominate, not to lord over others, but to participate in God’s liberating work.

One remarkable aspect of this passage is the many titles attributed to Jesus. Healer, teacher, confessor, priest, brother, friend, Lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah, Christ—Jesus becomes what people need in each moment. The same is true for us: the specific cause we are called to often arises from how we have uniquely encountered Christ in our own lives.

Which brings us to the real challenge of this text: Now what? Here are two collective actions we can consider: Join a prison letter-writing team to offer support and hope to those incarcerated, or co-host a neighborhood meal to foster community connection and engage in meaningful conversations about justice and liberation. These steps can transform our curiosity into action, moving us toward the collective liberation we seek.

John bore witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God and the Son of God. Andrew and another disciple initially regarded Jesus as Rabbi, but after spending time with him, Andrew's understanding deepened. He informed his brother Simon, "We have found the Messiah!"

Each of them had encountered Jesus. Each of them had seen something. And each of them felt compelled to tell others about it.

My previous sermon on this text from 2023 ended with an invitation to practice witnessing, to practice what I called "gospeling," sharing the good news of what God has been up to in our lives. I want to extend that invitation again today, but with a deeper grounding in our cause.

Evangelism does not require persuading or converting others, nor does it depend on dramatic testimonies or simplified narratives. The enfleshed liturgy reminds us: "Our testimonies of deliverance do not need to be any particular way to be effective. They don't need to be dramatic... They don't need to be complicated. Neither do they need to be oversimplified." (Deliverance Ministry Testimonies - Real Stories of Freedom Through Christ, n.d.)

What matters is authenticity. What matters is pointing toward "the things that help all of us thrive. The things of God. Freedom. Love. Compassion. Vulnerability. Justice."

Poet Andrea Gibson observes, "Sometimes the most healing thing to do is remind ourselves over and over and over, other people feel this too." (Gibson, 2017) Testimony serves this purpose: it breaks isolation, offers hope, and transforms hearts.

And here's the crucial piece: Our cause is not for individual success but for collective liberation. We're not witnessing so that people will admire our personal

relationship with Jesus. We're witnessing because others need to know that the pit doesn't last forever. That waiting isn't pointless. That God is on the side of the oppressed and working through them for freedom.

Queer and BIPOC theologians challenge us to move "from a master/servant framework to an egalitarian family framework, blessing each other out of love" (Crowley, 2024). This shift is revolutionary. In harmful spiritual communities, individuals may be pressured into service, told their suffering is sacred, and manipulated into exhaustion. That is not God's way. When we serve from love rather than guilt, and witness from authentic encounter rather than obligation, everything changes.

Here's what I want you to take with you today: When we realize our work is God's work, the burden of the struggle feels lighter.

This is not because the struggle ceases or difficulties vanish, but because individuals are not alone in their efforts. The universe and others join in the cause. As the Servant in Isaiah proclaims, "My cause is with the Lord."

John witnessed. He told people to look at Jesus. Andrew witnessed. He found his brother and said, "We have found the Messiah." That's how it works: one person encounters God's liberating love, tells someone else, and the movement spreads.

Now it's our turn.

How is Jesus coming to you? What need is God working to meet in your life? What pit has God drawn you out of? And having encountered the grace upon grace of the Word of God in your life, who are you going to tell?

It's okay to start small. Share a story over your next meal with loved ones. Practice the language of witnessing in safe spaces. But practice it. Because evil and injustice depend on people believing they're alone, that there's no way out, that life can't be different.

Your testimony, however simple, however ordinary, might be exactly what someone else needs to hear to believe that liberation is possible.

Let us affirm our commitment to witnessing with a simple spoken response: "We will witness." Together, this communal declaration transforms our individual

inspirations into a shared covenant, a promise to carry forward our cause with unity and purpose.

John did it. Andrew and many others after them did it. Now it's our turn to go forth and become with God who becomes with us. Amen.