

Who Am I? What Am I To Do?

*1st Sunday after Epiphany: the Baptism of our Lord, Year C. January 13, 2013. Christ Church, Sheridan.
(Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22)*

There are two basic needs we all have if we are to be spiritually whole and mentally healthy. The first is to be able to give a true answer to the question, “Who am I?” —to *know who we REALLY are* (our core identity). After all, there are many correct responses a person can give to the question “Who am I?” For example, I could say: “I’m Bruce McNab. ...I’m the husband of Joan. ...I’m the father of Fred, Katy, Margaret Ann, and Mary Alice. ...I’m a retired priest. ...*Etc., etc., etc.*” But such labels as these – while they might be accurate – are never our *core* identity, the one that “defines” us and out of which we choose to live our lives.

We tend to “try on” various identities as we go through life, as if they were masks or costumes. We can see this clearly in very young children. When our granddaughter Lucy, who will soon be eight, was about five years old she had a clothes rack full of princess dresses. She would put on a dress, strike a pose, and announce “I am Princess Fiona.” Or Princess Somebody-Else. In ten years Lucy will be eighteen, and she won’t imagine herself as a fairy tale princess anymore. But she might be forty-five (or even sixty-five) before she gets in touch with the deep core identity she needs to “own” and be able to say: “This is who I am.”

I said there are two basic needs we all have if we’re to be spiritually and mentally whole. The first is to *know our core identity*—to be able to give a true answer to the question, “Who am I?” The second is to *know our purpose in life*—to be able to answer the question, “What am I in this world to do?” Questions of “being” and “doing” are always linked. From Christmas ‘til today, our Sunday readings from the Bible have been offering answers to the questions, “Who is Jesus, really?” and “What did Jesus come to do?”

Jesus was Son of God, but he was also a human being just like us. And he had to work with the same two big questions of identity and purpose we do. I don’t for a minute believe that little Jesus, toddling around the house at the age of three while his mother cooked dinner, or watching Joseph sawing wood at the age of six, or teaching his little brothers how to make a slingshot at age eleven, had a clear grasp of his core identity.

I believe that though his first thirty years, right up ‘til the moment described in today’s gospel, Jesus was steadily working with the question, “Who am I?” and its corollary, “What am I supposed to do?” He might have thought, as he grew older: “*If I’m just a carpenter, then I’m supposed to make things and build houses. That’s easy. But what if I’m really more than that? What if God sent me into the world to do something for Him? ...How can I know? ...How can I be sure?*”

And through those years Jesus had to struggle with times of doubt, uncertainty, and anguish. I think it was Jesus’ quest to define his own identity and mission that took him out to the Jordan wilderness to join the people who were gathering around his cousin, John, the prophet known as The Baptizer. Baptizing crowds of people in the river for repentance was an unauthorized ritual that made John unpopular with the main Jewish religious leaders. Jesus’ decision to join his controversial cousin and undergo John’s baptism was a sign of Jesus’ own willingness to step out of life’s predictable routines and do something unexpected or even shocking.

John found his own identity in being the “advance man” for the Messiah, as we talked about back in Advent. John was expecting a Messiah who would be just like him, a fire-breathing prophet, the kind of person my East Texas neighbors back in the 1950s would have called “a screamin’ preacher.” John had decided the Messiah, when he finally came, would conduct a “sorting-out” of God’s people. That’s what he meant when he said, *“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

Today we heard about the baptism of Jesus. But maybe you noticed that Luke seemed more interested in what happened afterwards. He wrote: *“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.”*

I believe that all his life, right up ‘til then, Jesus had been asking: *“Father, show me what you want me to do!”* Now, as he prayed after his baptism, God’s Spirit came upon him *“in bodily form, like a dove.”* Notice that the Spirit of God did not come invisibly, but as a dove—a peaceful dove, a sign of creation and new life. The sign of a dove is very different from the fire of judgment The Baptizer had predicted.

As the Spirit came, God spoke to Jesus and said *“You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* Now his struggle with the questions of identity and purpose had reached its moment of resolution! *Now* his prayers were answered. *Now he knew for sure who he was:* God’s SON. And he knew *what he was supposed to do:* identify with the ordinary people of the land, the poor people, the “sinners,” and give NEW LIFE to them—not incinerate them as if they were chaff.

When Jesus was praying, deliberately centering his life in God his Father, the Spirit came and God spoke. Later, we see Jesus praying repeatedly in times of crisis and responding to the guidance and assurance that came from God.

All of us need *affirmation*. We need someone special, someone influential in our life, to tell us: *“I believe in you. You’re doing the right thing. You’re on the right track. Go for it!”* The Voice of God came to Jesus just when he most needed it. And that Voice launched him on his mission as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

You and I will arrive at knowledge of our own core identity and life-purpose only when we become so deeply grounded in our soul that we can hear the Voice of God. That grounding will enable us to withstand the harsh judgments of others, even of people who think they know us best. Such a grounding comes when we have developed the habit of orienting ourselves to God, developing the habit of “listening prayer.”

A reporter once asked Mother Teresa, “What do you do when you pray?” She said, “I listen.” Then the reporter asked, “Well, what does God do?” She said, “He listens.” When we are listening to God and God is listening to us, a powerful kind of communication happens!

It was when Jesus was listening that the Spirit descended upon him and the Father said, *“You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”* —The Voice that spoke to Jesus at his baptism will speak to us *if we listen with faith*. The Father wants to tell us who we are: his own dear children. And the Spirit will descend upon us with peace and power if we’re willing to find our life’s purpose in doing our Father’s will.