

Epiphany III

January 27, 2013

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Who are you? What is your story? What is your purpose in life? Those are all big questions, of course. You have heard me and probably other preachers ask a variation of those questions at some point in your life. Many of us ask ourselves those questions throughout our lives. What is our central identity, the core of our being? And what do we think our life is about—its purpose, what gives meaning to us so that we can get up in the morning and move through the day.

Now at this point I could simply sit down and let us all ponder those questions and that may actually be helpful. But part of our tradition is to have a preacher to help us walk through questions, especially tough questions. Part of my job—any preacher’s job-- is to think about these questions and pray and search our scripture and tradition to help us find answers.

The Gospel for today-- and really the first part of the Gospel of Luke—addresses those questions for Jesus. Now Jesus is unique in many ways—he is the Son of God; but Jesus is also fully human and his life experience can help us as we seek answers to those important questions for our lives. Because scripture records that in his life Jesus had questions and struggles. Despite the unique and glorious beginning to his life, Jesus still had to pray and study and experience life so that he knew the answers to “Who am I?” and “What is the purpose of my life?”

Two weeks ago I talked about Jesus and how he was known for praying. I talked about the elements that made him that way—his faithful upbringing by his parents and community; and also the difficult experiences in his life, like the death of Joseph. They worked together to make Jesus a man of prayer. Luke reports Jesus praying more than any other Gospel.

Prayer helped Jesus to know his identity and the purpose of his life. You see prayer is not only something for us to rely on when we’re in difficulties; or a practice we need to follow in order to be religiously faithful. Prayer also shapes us throughout our lives to know the answers to those big questions of identity and meaning. Prayer opens us to God’s will for us and for humanity in a way that few other practices will ever do.

As Jesus prayed throughout his life; as he studied and reflected on scripture; and as he observed and experienced the full range of life, from joy to sorrow, Jesus’ life came into focus for him. He trusted God with his life. He experienced God as a loving father. His faith in a loving God called him to be a person who would be involved in the world around him. That faith led to his baptism which we heard about two weeks ago. Through his baptism, Jesus identified with all sorts of people, many of them not at all like him—sinners, tax collectors, and so forth. He learned his identity was more than a religious man who did all the right things; he was “the Son of Man,” who could connect to and identify with all people.

Through his life and ministry, as he came to know more and more people on the margins or outside of society, he confirmed that his identity was with them.

Jesus also clarified his identity as he was tempted by the devil in the desert. We will hear that Gospel lesson in three weeks as we begin Lent, so I don't want to get ahead of myself. But let me give you a brief preview—Jesus was tempted to use his great gifts and even his great calling in a way that would betray his identity. The devil tempted Jesus to forget that his first loyalty is to God and that his loyalty to God made him a certain type of person. Even though he had such great gifts and such a powerful calling, his identity as a person loyal to God made Jesus humble and patient and aware of people around him. Jesus knew people needed help, especially help to know and trust in God. His gifts and calling were not just about him; his purpose in life was about the people he was called to help.

So that brings us to the Gospel for today. Jesus had just begun in his public ministry. We're told the good reports about him were beginning to circulate in the countryside. And then this budding prophet came to his hometown and went to the synagogue where he had learned so much of his identity. What would he do? How would he express his purpose to the people who knew him as a boy and a young man? Would they listen to him or would their familiarity make them unable to hear him?

We're told that Jesus turned to the scripture, their shared source for identity and purpose. He turned to Isaiah, that great prophet and poet. Jesus chose a powerful passage that captured for him his identity and the purpose for his life. Jesus could have chosen from among thousands of verses of scripture, but these two verses from the poet-prophet proclaimed in a special way Jesus' identity and his purpose in life. There are two things in these verses that stand out to me:

- First, Jesus knew God was with him, having “anointed” him with the Spirit like the prophets before him were filled with the Spirit for the work they were called to do; and like kings and high priests in earlier days were anointed with oil. This was his core identity.
- Second, Jesus knew that he was called to challenge what was wrong in the world and set things right. He offered hope to people who were discouraged and powerless; and healing and freedom for those who were blind and in bondage. His purpose was to make a difference in the lives of people with great need. In different ways, that includes all of us.

Now if you read on to the next section of the Gospel, things go from very positive to very negative in how people responded to Jesus' proclamation about who he is and what he will do. But that's not the focus of our reflection today. For us, it is to know that Jesus was clear about his identity and that clarity and conviction allowed Jesus to stay centered through all he faced in life, no matter how people responded to him, good and bad.

So how would we answer that question today? How do we answer it? Who am I? And then based on that answer, what is my purpose?

The church's answer in the gospel we proclaim is that each one of us is a child of God. We are precious to God, like a child is to loving parents. That is a message some of us need to hear over and over—“You are a child of God. You are precious to God.” That message is true—and if we believe, it can

bring healing for us. If we don't feel worthy, if we're like those people getting baptized by John the Baptist and alongside Jesus, God's love for us is great good news. Remember Jesus was one of us and he was not ashamed to identify with us and be baptized with folks just like us—people who might not do the right things all the time, but people who came to believe they were precious to God.

So that's the first part—your identity. You are a beloved child of God. So what does that mean for our purpose? Does this great good news allow us to kick back and relax and know that no matter what, God loves us? Well, yes and no. Knowing God loves us can release us from doing things in order to earn God's favor. That type of religious anxiety is not for good for us; it's not really good for anyone around us, either, as we can be so concerned with doing the right thing, that we lose our humanity. So we can relax, thanks be to God.

But as we are relaxing, we are called to remember that God's purpose for us includes sharing this great good news with others. We can do that with words and with actions, expressing the love of God we have experienced to people around us who are in great need of that same love. We are blessed to eat from a bountiful table of God's grace; what ungrateful children we would be if we don't look for hungry people and invite them to God's table, too. Because the feast is God's and there is more than enough for everyone.

So that's who we are and what we're called to do. The practical part of that identity and calling may look different for each one of us. Some of us are vocal and upfront; some are quiet and in the background. But as long as we know who we are—a beloved child of God; and as long as we do what we do because of who we are—and whose we are—then our purpose in life will be fulfilled. Amen.