

Who Am I? What Am I To Do?

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

1st Sunday after Epiphany: The Baptism of the Lord. Yr. C. Jan. 11, 2004. (First Sunday as Rector of Christ Church.)

Here's a question to think about: *When do you become who you are?* Or *When is it clear who you're going to be?* ...and *What you're going to do?*

There's a wonderful time in our childhood when we can play around with all kinds of possibilities: Our imaginations let us see ourselves in many different guises: astronauts, scientists, athletes, explorers, heroes.

We have two grandsons here in Aspen — ages 5 and 8 — and they're pretty sure that they're going to be either Olympic snowboarders or pilots when they grow up. (Do any 8 year-olds imagine themselves as CPA's or corporate trainers? Do you know any little kids who ever have friends over to play lawyer and client?)

When we get older we get serious about our life and our life's work... Who we're going to *be*, and what we're going to *do* "when we grow up." Of course, you know, the age of being grown up seems to be fairly flexible these days. I'm not sure it comes much earlier than 30.

Sometimes we become adults, get graduate degrees, get married, have a career (maybe even a very successful career in some ways) and then discover that *we really don't know who we are*. I think that's what we label the "mid-life crisis." (Have you had yours yet? Some of us have had several!)

There is a basic need we all have if we are to be spiritually and mentally whole: to know *who we are* (our identity) and *what we're meant to do* (our life purpose or mission).

You may be wondering where I'm going with this and how it has anything to do with the gospel. So here's the connection: What the Scriptures have been trying to tell us from Christmas 'til today, are the Biblical answers to the questions, "Who is Jesus, really?" and "What did Jesus come to do?"

When Jesus went down to the Jordan River to where his cousin John was preaching and baptizing, I think He was doing something that all of us do: he was struggling with the big questions of identity and purpose. This is sheer speculation on my part, but I believe Jesus had been wrestling with question of his identity for a long time, trying to make some sense out of his personal history and the stories that Mary and Joseph told him about his birth.

What did it mean to Him to be told that he was the Son of The Most High... as well as the son of Joseph the carpenter and his wife Mary?

Jesus clearly had a deep, inner relationship to God. He even called God his "Abba" — a word that means "dear Father." It's an intimate name, the name he would have used for Joseph. It is the name used by a dutiful and affectionate child for a loving and faithful father. And if God was Jesus' Father, what did that mean about his life's work, his purpose? Jewish boys in those days took on their Fathers' trade. If Jesus recognized God as his Father, should he continue to be merely a village carpenter? Or was there something *more* for him.... some *higher* calling, some *larger* purpose?

John the Baptizer, the fire-breathing prophet who was calling God's people to repentance and new life, was Jesus' cousin. They were almost the same age. They had known one another all their lives. John was probably the best-known person in all of Judea and Galilee, did you know that? He was the first authentic prophet to appear in more than 400 years. We don't know what led Jesus to go down to the river and let John baptize him with his baptism of repentance. But I believe that decision was a key moment in Jesus' working out an answer to the big questions of identity and purpose: *Who am I?* and *What am I going to do?*

All kinds of people were going to John and asking for baptism, repenting of their sins and promising to lead a new life: soldiers, farmers, tax collectors, housewives, and even some priests and Levites.

I think there came a moment when Jesus said to himself, as he stood there watching the crowds coming down to the water confessing their sins and asking God's forgiveness: *"These are my people! ...My people! My life's work must be for them — to identify with them in their need for repentance and new life."* Though he was a righteous man he chose to identify himself with the un-righteous and the outcasts and to meet their needs. So he plunged into the waters of the Jordan as a sign of his new clarity of vision and commitment. It was a life decision, a new commitment made in faith out of obedience and love for God.

In a sense, Jesus went into the river to take on the sins that the others were laying down. When you were a kid, were you ever in a family where mom put the children in the bathtub one after another? Only the first kid had clean bathwater. Everybody else washed in the dirty water that had made the others clean. In a sense, Jesus went into the water of the Jordan River and *took on* what the others had washed off. He took on their sins. That's why John pointed to him and said to the bystanders, "Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Jesus chose to be one with the hurting, hoping People of God.

Jesus had been praying all His life, "Father, show me what you want me to do!" I believe that he went into the water and let his cousin baptize him because he felt like God had given him an answer. Then,

after the baptism, the gospel of Luke says Jesus was praying. And as he was praying, the Spirit came upon him and the Father spoke, in the depth of his heart: *"You are my Son, my beloved, and I am so pleased with you!"* Jesus' struggle with the questions of identity and purpose had reached its turning point, its moment of resolution. His prayers had been answered. He knew who he was and what he was going to do with his life.

All of us need *affirmation*, don't we? We need someone very special to us, very powerful in our lives, to say to us: "I believe in you. You're doing the right thing. You're on the right track. And you make me very happy indeed!" The Voice of God came to Jesus at the moment he needed to hear it the most. And this Divine affirmation launched him on his mission as the Christ, the Messiah, the Redeemer, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

All of us struggle with the need to be recognized, validated, affirmed and told that we're significant. But our life journeys have shown us that the recognition and affirmation we seek from others can quickly be withdrawn. One day we're popular; the next day we're ignored. One day we're the hero; the next day we're the goat.

A sense of authentic identity and purpose requires a grounding within — in the depths of the soul, where the Voice of God speaks to us — a grounding that will enable us to withstand the fickle opinions and judgments of other people.

The vision of the dove and the voice of the Father came to Jesus...not to the bystanders. And in the next three years, as Jesus lived out his vocation, as he was confronted with repeated moments of temptation, rejection, and ridicule ...in situations where his sense of identity and mission were tested ...and in the very end when all his friends had abandoned or betrayed him, he had to rely on the affirmation of the Father that he had felt deep in his soul on that day when John had baptized him. *"You are my Son, my Beloved. I am very pleased with you."*

The Voice of God that spoke to Jesus and the Spirit of God that rested on Jesus still come to the faithful, prayerful, seeking, soul today. The Voice still speaks to those who have ears of the heart with which to hear God, and that loving Voice says: "You are my beloved child. And I am so pleased, so *very* pleased, with you!"