

I've just got to be me.

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

1st Sunday after Epiphany: The Baptism of the Lord. Yr. A. January 13, 2008. (Text: Matthew 3:13-17)

Have you noticed that film-makers seem to have a fresh interest in the “western”? They haven’t gone back to John Wayne-style formula flicks, but stories set in the Old West, like last year’s *3:10 to Yuma*, or *Open Range* three years earlier (featuring Aspen’s own Kevin Costner), have made a comeback. They tell a timeless human story with a theme going all the way back to the Greek classics: the hero’s struggle to claim and live into his identity. In these westerns, there always comes a scene where the peace-loving main character straps on his six-guns, saddles his horse, and gets ready to ride out to confront the bad guys. As he’s about to mount up, his sweet wife comes out and throws her arms around him and begs him to stay home with her and the kids and save his life. But he tells her, “I couldn’t hold my head up in this valley if I didn’t go out there and face ‘em. It’s somethin’ I have to do. I’ve just got to be me.”

“I’ve just got to be me.” Here’s a question to think about: *When do you become who you are? ...Or, when in your life is it clear who you’re meant to be and what you’re meant to do?*

There’s a wonderful time in childhood when we can play around with all kinds of possibilities. Our imaginations let us see ourselves in many different guises: as astronauts, scientists, athletes, explorers, or super-heroes with cool masks and capes. We have two grandsons up in Montana — age nine and eleven — and they’re pretty sure that they’re going to be professional freestyle skiers or pilots when they grow up. (Do any kids ever imagine themselves as CPAs or corporate trainers? Do you know any nine year-olds who have friends over to play lawyer and client?)

When kids get older they get serious about their life and their life’s work... Especially what they’re going to *do* “when they 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 a financial sense), but then one day we wake up to the fact that *we really don’t know who we are*. We have a “job,” maybe even a well-paying job, but we don’t have a deep sense of identity. That’s what some people label the “mid-life crisis.”

If we’re going to be spiritually whole, there’s a basic need we all have: a need to know *who we are* (our identity) and understand *what we’re meant to do* (our life purpose or mission). And I say “meant to do” very intentionally, because for most of us there are a variety of things we *could* do (or could have done when we were younger), different kinds of jobs or careers in which we could perform well. But what were we *meant* to do? What were we *created* to do? What’s the essential purpose of our life here on earth? It’s the classic religious question: *What am I here for?*

If life is meaningless, then every religion is a waste of time. But if every life *has* meaning, then religion is essential for every human being. From Christmas until today, the Church has been offering us passages from the Bible that help us deal with these fundamental questions – *Who am I?* and *What am I meant to do?*— through reflection on how Jesus dealt with the same questions himself.

When Jesus at the age of thirty went down to the Jordan River where his cousin John was preaching and baptizing, I think He was doing what we 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 these questions for years, 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? (What does it mean to *you* to be told that you’re a “child of God”?)

Jesus clearly had a deep, inner relationship with God. He even called God his “*Abba*” — a word that means “dear Father.” It’s the same intimate name he’d used for Joseph, the name an affectionate Jewish child of the first century used in addressing his dad. But if God was Jesus’ Father, what did that mean about Jesus’ life-work, his purpose? In those days Jewish boys always took on their fathers’ trade. If Jesus owned God as his Father, and not just Joseph, should he continue to be merely a village carpenter? Or was there something *more* for him... some *higher* calling, some *larger* purpose in life?

We don’t know exactly what led Jesus to ask John to baptize him with his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but I believe that decision was a key moment in Jesus’ working out his answer to the big questions of identity and purpose: *Who am I?* and *What am I meant to do?*

Many different sorts of people were going to John and asking for baptism, repenting of their sins and promising to lead a new life. I think there came a moment when Jesus said to himself, as he stood watching the crowds of ordinary people – tradesmen and farmers and housewives and soldiers – coming down to the water confessing their sins and asking God’s forgiveness, “*These are my Abba’s people. If they’re His people, then they’re my people! My life’s work must be for them.*” Jesus was a righteous man, but he chose to identify with sinners and outcasts; therefore, he plunged into the waters of the Jordan as a sign of his new self-understanding. It was a fundamental decision about his identity and purpose, a commitment he made in faith and love for God. In a sense, Jesus got baptized in order to take upon himself the burden of sin that the others were laying down. He went into the water and *took on* what the others had washed off. That’s why John later pointed to him and said to bystanders, “Look! There’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”

Jesus had been praying through all the thirty years of his life, “Father, show me what you want me to do!” I think he went into the water and let John baptize him because he felt God prompting him to do it right at that moment. When he had been baptized and was coming up from the river, Matthew tells us “the heavens opened,” and as the Spirit of God descended on him as a dove, the voice of his Father, his Abba, spoke to everyone: “*This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*” Jesus’ struggle with the questions of identity and purpose had reached its turning point, its moment of resolution. His prayers had been answered. Finally he owned the truth of who he was and what he was meant to do.

All of us need *affirmation* and *reassurance*. We need someone very important to us, someone very powerful in our lives, to say “I believe in you. You’re on the right track. Just keep going. You make me very happy!” 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 Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

All of us wrestle with the need to be recognized, validated, and told that we’re significant. But our lives have shown us that the recognition 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 our true identity and purpose demands grounding deep within — in the depths of our souls, where the Voice of God speaks. It demands an understanding of the life of Christ as the pattern for our own being. (This is so important!) This enables us to claim our identity, discover our own True Self, and grasp the purpose of our existence – despite even the well-intentioned pleas of people who love us, but want to “save us from ourselves,” like the sweetheart of our western movie hero, or – in the gospel – Jesus’ Mother, who begged him to come on back home to Nazareth and not get himself in trouble with important people.

The Voice of God spoke to Jesus and the Spirit of God rested on Jesus. That Voice and that Spirit still come to those who are in love with God and ask, “Who am I, Father? ... What is my life all about?” The One who spoke to Jesus will speak to us, if we love Him enough to ask Him our questions and trust Him enough to wait for his answer.