

“A Question of Identity”
Jonah 3:1-10 and Psalm 62:5-10
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
January 21, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

Life is full of questions, all kinds of questions.

How long will the government shutdown last? How will the Supreme Court rule on the travel ban? How serious is Tom Brady’s hand injury? Who is going to win the Super Bowl? What words will be on the spelling test this week? How can I best prepare for the SAT? Is she really going out with him? What’s happening with the stock market? And most importantly today, can North Carolina beat Duke?

Years ago, one of my teachers shared that all great literature has one of three themes: a person against nature, a person against another person, or a person against themselves. That last category is fascinating, how we develop our sense of self in the midst of all the big and little queries of life.

It leads to the single most important question of all: Who am I?

Anne and I are about to replace the upstairs flooring in our home. The installers are arriving this week. Anne and I have been following their directions: disconnecting the electronics, taking down the books from the shelves, preparing for them to move all the furniture around. It’s a pain.

So we’ve been doing some serious spring cleaning. We pulled out carefully-closeted boxes, “family photos” and “children’s art”. We unearthed pottery and diplomas, travel books and albums. We remembered. We smiled and laughed. We recalled our place in the story.

You and I search for identity in so many different ways. Some of us point to parenthood, the nurture of children and grandchildren, or career, the accomplishments and achievements of vocation, or wealth, the accumulation of resources. Some of us protect our country in our armed forces. Some serve as first responders in our community.

Different people answer the question in different ways. Some of us yearn and work for time, others peace, others power, others prestige, others justice, still others money.

What’s your story? Who are you?

This morning our scripture lessons invite these questions of identity. Tim Verhey, a professor at St. Andrews University, puts it this way, “We find meaning in the midst of [our human] finitude – and the corresponding temptation for [us] to place our trust in something less than God.” You know what he’s talking about.

He puts his finger right on it when he quotes Reinhold Niebuhr. To paraphrase: We are caught up in natural life – hungering and thirsting and desiring and aging. But at the very same moment, we catch glimpses that our appetites may not satisfy our spirit. So we worry. And in our anxiety, we seek to find some way to change our finitude into infinity, our weakness into strength, our dependence into independence.

You and I hunger and thirst and covet and want. But we know there is more. We know there is something more, something that represents purpose and meaning and victory and depth in human life.

This intuition, this gut instinct is one of the main things that drives us all here, here to worship, here to prayer, here to the words of scripture, here to one another.

Who am I? For us, that question leads to Jesus. That's who we are, followers of Christ. As you look around the room/our sanctuary at the stained glass, you find answers through his story.

Jesus is the One who honors and transforms the life of a faithful servant girl, Mary. He is the living God, come to life as a human being. He is the One who knocks on the door of our heart, inviting us into relationship with God. He is God's beloved Son, named and claimed at baptism. He is Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, crucified and then raised from the dead. He is the One who lives on in heaven, praying for us, loving us, guiding us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

He is the One who gives himself on the cross for our sakes. He is the Good Shepherd, who loves us tenderly.

But one of our stained glass windows is different. Have you ever noticed? Ironically, it's the one that focuses primarily on us, rather than Jesus. In the back corner, tucked behind the south stairs to the balcony, you see it, a window filled with symbols – the descending dove of the Holy Spirit, the burning bush with Moses in the wilderness, the lamp of God's Word, a Bible verse in Latin, proclaiming that God's light shines in the darkness.

Do you know that symbol? It was the seal of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the old Southern Presbyterian Church. For many years, it was a part of our identity, the gathered identity of this congregation. But for the last thirty-five years, we have been a part of a different church, a reunited church, Presbyterians north and south now together again.

That window reminds us that identity questions are tricky. Things change. Questions lead in unexpected directions. Life has surprising twists and turns. There are some boxes of the heart, boxes of family photos or service medals or news clippings that we may not have the strength to open.

That's exactly how it is in the story of Jonah.

Jonah is a prophet, called by God to proclaim God's Word. We think we know how this is going to go. We expect some opposition and resistance, perhaps misunderstanding and delay. But the prophet will accept his vocation and preach God's Word. That's just what prophets do.

But Jonah? Nah. No sooner does God tell him to go to Nineveh than he flees in the other direction. He doesn't just run. He gets on the fastest ship he can find to get away from God.

You know the story. It's the Gentile sailors on the boat who demonstrate faith, not Jonah. And after his experience in the belly of the fish, he gives in and heads to Nineveh to proclaim God's judgment. There, right there, just one verse beyond the end of today's reading, Jonah becomes angry: angry that God decides to spare the people of Nineveh, angry that God changes God's mind.

Jonah is lost in his bitterness and resentment. Right there, comes one of the best lines in the story. God says to the sulking Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Friends, things change. Life sneaks up on us. Sometimes the ground shifts under our feet. Sometimes you and I are confused or disappointed or angry. We have to define ourselves differently than before. Right then, in unexpected times and places, really weird and funky times and places, just when everything seems out of control, God shows up with grace and peace and love.

Things change. Unexpected change came to Oak Ridge, Tennessee during and after World War II. It went from sleepy mountain village to bustling city, home to one of the most important nuclear facilities in the United States. The well-known preacher Fred Craddock began his ministry there. He tells this story.

Construction workers came from all over the nation to Oak Ridge. They lived in mobile homes, campers, everywhere. Some of them began to visit the beautiful church he was serving.

One Sunday after worship, he suggested to one of the leaders of the congregation that they develop an outreach program to invite all those families to faith and membership in the church.

The leader said they “are not our kind of people.” They wouldn’t fit in, he said. At the very next meeting of the church board, one of the members immediately suggested the board declare that anyone had to own property in the county to become a member. The motion passed. Only one person voted against it – Fred Craddock. He was quickly reminded that the preacher’s vote didn’t count.

Many years later, Fred Craddock and his wife were traveling through Tennessee. They stopped at that church. He was amazed to see the parking lot filled with cars, pickup trucks and motorcycles. He saw a sign that read, “Barbeque: All You Can Eat.” That’s when he realized the church building had become a restaurant.

He walked in and couldn’t believe his eyes. The pews had been removed for tables and chairs. The organ was pushed up against one wall. In that room were all kinds of people, from all walks of life, sitting down together, eating barbeque, hush puppies and cole slaw, drinking sweet tea.

Fred Craddock turned to his wife and said that it was a good thing that the church was now a restaurant, because otherwise all those people wouldn’t be welcomed there.

Sisters and brothers, God’s Word cuts through all our assumptions and preconceptions, all our self-centered answers, all our lust and greed and desire. It teaches us who we are. It all comes down to this: For God alone, my soul waits. God alone is our rock and salvation.

The psalmist is straight with us. Our health challenges and financial struggles do not define us. And neither does the car we drive, the home in which we live, our color or education or gender or background. It doesn’t matter how well we’ve done or how many times we have screwed up. In the end, God’s steadfast love is sovereign. Love is what matters.

All of us can find our meaning in God. Our story may be rags to riches; our story may be unending financial difficulties. Our story may be success and good fortune; our story may be one tough thing after another.

But there is a place for every story in God’s story. There is a place for your story in God’s story. No matter where you have been, no matter what has happened, no matter what you have achieved or how you have failed, the Lord is a God of steadfast love, merciful, tender, persistent.

My mother graduated from high school in Latta, South Carolina at the end of the eleventh grade. You could do there that back in 1943. She never achieved any other formal education. She came from a family that was poor in money but rich in love.

Here’s what I remember. She didn’t worry about her lack of education and degrees. She didn’t focus on being firmly grounded in the middle class – to be honest, the lower middle class. No, she kept her heart in Christ.

She taught my brother and me how to forgive. She taught us how to get along. She taught us to welcome others. She taught us to open our hearts to life. As she reflected God’s light, she taught us the most important thing of all: We are God’s children. We are saved by God’s love.

That’s it. That’s where all our questions lead. They lead us home. We are God’s children. We are saved by God’s love.