

What Does It Mean to Be Who We Are?
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22; Isaiah 43:1-7
Baptism of the Lord/Ordination and Installation

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His 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."

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Sermon

What does it mean to be alive?

Musca domestica is a fascinating and, depending on your sensibilities, beautiful animal: deep red eyes, delicate wings and a thrilling capacity for flight, which is the source of *Musca domestica*'s common name: the fly.

Each female fly can lay approximately 500 eggs in a lifetime; the eggs hatch in about 36 hours. When their metamorphosis is complete, an adult fly lives for anywhere from two weeks to a monthⁱ (assuming they don't meet a swatter)—

Not a whole lot of time on this earth, which may help to explain why no housefly has ever graduated from college, completed a symphony or written a dissertation.

What does it mean to be alive?

Diane was a 48-year-old office manager who was part of a recent study of eating habits.ⁱⁱ For Diane, food was “entirely about pleasure and imagination,” a matter only of what she liked and what she wanted.

“She obsessed over the variables that might interfere with her enjoyment,” said an article in the *New Republic*. “Diane invited the researchers to a café nearby so they could see her navigate the menu, or rather navigate its dearth of appetizing options.

“When dinner was served, she ate rapidly but didn't finish. She would only eat a cooked meal, she explained, when it was still piping hot.

“So Diane was a picky eater. And this might have given the food she ate greater meaning, since in order to truly love a certain dish—not too salty, not too sweet—you have to reject other, lesser forms of it.

“But in truth Diane complained of being deeply miserable. Her selections were more pained than indulgent. The food she made such a show of ordering at the café was nothing more than a plain egg on toast, which quickly became revolting to her as it cooled.

“As she neared the age of 50, she felt she'd let her mother down because her fussiness meant they could never share a meal together.

“Her friends no longer invited her to dinner.

“She lived on a diet of de-food-ified food: processed cheese, breakfast cereal, potato chips, and sliced bread.”ⁱⁱⁱ

She was so picky about her food that she had ended up somewhat ironically reducing her diet down to a number of things that Michael Pollan would classify

not so much as food, but as “food-like substances:” bland, unnatural, stripped of nutrients: maybe filling, but not very nourishing, and not at all satisfying.

It is possible for a human being to find so many things unacceptable—to cut out so many things that don’t fall into the “comfort foods” category, whether or not we’re even talking about food—until there is no wonder, no surprise, no joy, no awe.

What does it mean to be alive? You have more time and more opportunity to do things than a common housefly. But a housefly is alive.

So what does it mean to be alive, and to be who you are?

The Gospel message is that the Creator of the universe—not just the manufacturing, physical force, but the personality who conceived this monstrously unfathomable universe and imagined the substance of every atom before any of it existed—

The Gospel message is that the Creator of the universe has reached into our tiny pocket of existence to tell us what it means to be who we are.

Through signs, and covenants, and prophets, the ever-present but never-fully – knowable God gave us awe, and wonder, and ethics, and justice, and mercy: the Law. Essentially, love God, be God’s people, and be good to one another. And if you don’t feel like being good to your neighbor, at the very least, do no harm to your neighbor.

After Jesus’ mysterious childhood and unrecorded young adulthood, when he re-emerged into the world his first order of business was to be baptized into the tradition of God’s people: love God, be God’s people, and do no harm to one another.

And then came God’s most direct self-revelation.

Somebody once pointed out to me that in the Apostles’ Creed, the whole life of Jesus—all the teaching, the healing, the example he gave, the unsurpassed love he showed—all of that is represented in the Apostles’ Creed by a comma and a blank space: “Born of the virgin Mary—comma, space—suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

But a great deal took place between his birth and the crucifixion. In the words of the Brief Statement of Faith:

Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.^{iv}

In his baptized, human life, God showed us what it means to be who we are.

You see God, enfleshed, eating with outcasts, binding up the brokenhearted, healing the sick? Go do that.

It's not about thinking we can ever know the answer to the question, "What would Jesus do?" Even the Bible often seems as surprised at his statements and actions as you and I are, fumbling and inarticulate as to why he said or did them.

But throughout the gospel we see him being radically inclusive—
pushing the Ten Commandments past the point of doing no harm to a neighbor;
past the limits of proportional response—

culminating in his final commandment to those who would follow him most closely: Love one another, just as I have loved you.

That is to say: absolutely, unfailingly, unconditionally, unrestrictedly, self-sacrificially, and *to the end*, regardless of whether we can relate to each other or even understand each other.

Because part of what it means to be who I am is that I am never entirely understandable; and sometimes, I am intolerable.

But at all times, like you, like everyone else, I am made in the image of God, and for some reason, God accepts me, as God accepts you.

If Jesus was radically inclusive, then his Church will be radically inclusive, too.

No matter how you are made or how you understand yourself or how you identify. In Christ's church, even those who would exclude are included.

We were reminded over Christmas of what it means to be church by a busload of people who are not even Christian.

One of the busiest travel times of the year in Kenya is right around Christmastime, and a terrorist group has made its mark by stopping buses, calling out all Christians on board, and opening fire.

Less than a week before Christmas, they stopped a bus with more than 100 passengers on board, and ordered the Muslim passengers to come out of the bus and separate themselves from the Christians.

And the Muslim passengers, mostly women, said they were not going to do that.

They gave the Christian women their hijabs, and they helped others hide behind bags in the bus, and when the terrorists came into the bus, they said, "If you want to kill us, then kill us; but either kill us all or leave us alone."^v

That sounds an awful lot like church.

I'm reminded of the stories from occupied countries in World War II, when the Nazis would come into the village, and Christians who were hiding Jews in the basement, in the root cellar, in the outhouse, under the floorboards—people who in the first place had been taught that lying is a sin, and in the second place knew that if they were found out, their fate would be gruesome—the Nazis would bang on the door and ask if there were any Jews around, and they'd go, "Hmm? What?"

That's church.

We can be thankful that our own present circumstances are not remotely so dire. But there is a world of refugees out there, and there are thousands of hungry people in our region, and there are unknown numbers of outcasts right outside our doors, and we have an opportunity to be church.

Just the other day a relative of someone who's receiving care and attention from our church family sent me a lovely, short note that just said, "Nice to see church being church."

What does it mean to be who we are?

It means we recognize that everything starts with God,
that Jesus Christ revealed God's love for humanity and all creation,
and that we can most fully embrace what it means to exist
by following his example and loving others as God loves us.

It means there are some things we are called to do,
and some things we strive to be,
and some things that we just are.

We are called and invited to live fully,
give generously,
love wastefully (as Bishop Spong says),
care for one another and God's creation.

We are bound to one another and to Christ;

We are mindful of what Schleiermacher called a "feeling of absolute dependence"
on the one whom Tillich called "the Ground of All Being."

And maybe, in some way, Church is that elusive thing that we strive to be—
the luminous answer to the question, "What does it mean to be who we are?"

Within the last decade, the PC(USA) has transformed parts of our polity to address
the concern that churches were having to spend too much of our precious resources
of energy on conforming to our organizational rules, and decided to refocus our
Form of Government from delineating procedures to just telling churches, "Here is
the mission: spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Now go do it."

Like all systemic changes, it's still got some kinks in it. We're still trying to make
our way forward with flashlights that you have to keep shaking to get the light to
stay on long enough to see where our next steps are going to be.

Today we install a new group of elders on session. They have been called by God
through the voice of this congregation. And they will play their part in helping us
to come up with an adequate answer to the question: What does it mean to be who
we are?

In the meantime, we have a God who has told us what is good and right and just and true, a God who says,

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

“For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

“You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”

We know what we need to do. Let’s be nourished at this table, and go do it.

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January 10, 2016

ⁱ Though I remain a gushing font of useless information, I confess I got all this from Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Housefly>.

ⁱⁱ <https://newrepublic.com/article/124397/plight-picky-eater-bee-wilson-first-bite>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} From “A Brief Statement of Faith” in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Confessions* (10.2).

^v AnnieRose Ramos, “Muslims shield Christians when Al-Shabaab attacks bus in Kenya.” www.cnn.com/2015/12/22/africa/kenya-bus-attack-al-shabaab-muslim-christians/index.html