

“We Are What God Has Made Us”
Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:11-21; Numbers 21:4-9
Lent 4

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way.

⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”

⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:1-21

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Ephesians 2:1-10

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The Sermon

When John the Baptist began making a splash, word spread quickly through the towns and villages and countryside that something exciting was going on, some kind of prophet was loose in the land, some message was being proclaimed that people were finding life-changing.

Eventually, word about this phenomenon made it all the way to Jerusalem—the top of the food chain, in terms of sanctioned religious authority.

Inevitably, top echelons of religious food chains get their hackles raised when word emerges from somewhere way down the pecking order that there is some unsanctioned holiness breaking through.

And so, the religious authorities in Jerusalem sent a delegation of priests and Levites to find John the Baptist and ask him, straight up: “Who are you?”

In the words of the gospel according to John (the evangelist), in whose time this was a disputed question, and everything hinged on John the Baptist’s answer, “He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed:

“I am not the Messiah.”

And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the prophet?”

“No.”

Then they said to him:

“Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” (John 1:19-22)

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent, meaning we are at about the halfway point of the season of introspection which culminates at the cross before giving way to Easter.

And here in the middle of our journey, the Word of God seems to be asking us, once again, that exact question:

“Who are you?”

How do you answer that question?

Your name? A family connection, or a family role? I just met the adult daughter of a friend yesterday, and I was delighted that the first thing she said after her name was, “I’ve got a 12-year-old, an 8-year-old and a 5-year-old.”

Who are you? *That’s* who I am—I understand myself as who I am by virtue of the existence of those specific people.

I’ve spent a great deal of my life saying, “I’m Keith Grogg,” which is usually met with just dead silence until I go, “I’m Vivian Hare’s husband.” Oh, oh, right; good to meet you.

How do you answer the question: “Who are you?”

Job title? Military service branch? Part of the country you’re from? The church you go to? The church you pastor?

John the Baptist answered first of all who he was not.

They said, flatly, “Who are you?”

Lent is a particularly good time for us to remember his answer and apply it to ourselves: Who are you? “Well, first of all, I’m not the messiah.”

Remember a comedy show from the 80s called Cheers? I have this great memory of the main character having to write a check to the person to whom he paid rent every month, and the landlord just oozed condescension, and the main character, Sam, said, as he was writing his monthly rent check, “You’re not God, you know. I’m even going to write it on this check: YOU’RE. NOT. GOD.”

And the landlord with a sarcastic look on his face says, “Well, you’ve certainly put me in *my* place...”

Who are you?

Well, for starters, I’m not the messiah.

It seems pretty obvious when you say it.

But judging by what we sometimes expect of ourselves, maybe it’s not quite as obvious as it would seem.

I was doing my full-time volunteer work for a church in England before I went to seminary, and I had a rotten cold, but I thought you were just supposed to soldier on, so I showed up to morning prayer as always, and I was going to be just the tough young American who was going to act like it was no big deal. And after the morning prayer service, my supervisor said, “I assume you’re going to go back home and go to bed.”

Nope! No way; just going to work. No time to be sick! Just give me a job of work, and I’m Mister Reliable.

About that time the curate, which is like an associate pastor, came over and said, “It’s possible that the Kingdom of Christ may survive without you for one day.”

Pretty good point. Who are you? I’m not the messiah.

Three and a half years later, fresh out of seminary, newly ordained and in my first pastorate, I was half time pastor of a very small church and half time associate at a larger one; and the head of staff at the larger church told me that some of the people in that small church, which had seen some hard times, might be looking at me as that church's savior. I said, "Oh!"

He said, "And saviors get crucified."

I said, "Oh."

Who are you? "First things first, I am not the messiah."

As obvious as it seems, do you still find yourself expecting to have to work miracles every once in a while? How often do you feel, if only subconsciously, like only you can save a situation? Or a project? Or a relationship?

Sometimes we ride into Jerusalem and expect people to put down palm branches and shout hosanna—"Hey, everybody, thank God I'm here, because only *I* can redeem this situation."

And sometimes it's not arrogance or overconfidence, but a sense of reaching above ourselves just because we have to.

I recently heard of a church, very far from here, that is trying to figure out how to deal with an issue where there is someone of whom many in the congregation are afraid—they always know the person may fly off the handle at any second, which is bad enough; but some have been given reason to be concerned for their physical safety, and that of others: that this person, by their own threats and behavior, represents a clear and present danger.

Discussions have been held; approaches have been tried; adjudicating bodies have been enlisted. The situation has been going on for years.

The safety of the flock is at stake, and so much of that church's energy for mission is being diverted to trying to figure out what to do, having disagreements about what to do, coping with fears about what this person might do, and the precautions they're having to institute.

And some of the people there are having the hardest time with the idea that maybe that person should not be part of that congregation. They say, "God doesn't exclude anybody; how could we? What would that look like to people outside the church? What would it say to people *inside* the church?"

Of course, to be flummoxed by that idea is to believe that God is *only* inside *that particular church*: "We *have* to let this threat-making, potentially armed, dangerous person into our church and onto this property and into the sanctuary and the education building and the fellowship hall and the pastor's study because this is God's house, right? And we can't close the door of God's house on anybody, so we have to let them in, right?"

I imagine them praying, "Please, God, let this all just be a big misunderstanding, and maybe if we could all just have the right conversation, or the right prayer lifted up or the right hymn sung this Sunday, we'll all just end up hugging it out and living happily ever after."

Who are you? Well, you're a follower of Christ; you are a child of God; you are a member of the body of Christ. You are someone who knows that the best, most generous, gracious, loving aspiration of humanity is *to be Christ-like*. But you do not have to be the messiah.

And it's all right that you are not the messiah. Sometimes, it's OK just to be a good and faithful servant. Just to be a responsible steward. Just to

be a shepherd who takes care of the flock. It is not up to you to be the messiah.

In the dark of night, Nicodemus came to Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

It was only a statement, but almost certainly the statement stood in for the question that loomed in the darkness behind it:

Rabbi: Who are you?

They carried on a brief dialogue that only served to demonstrate how hard it is to comprehend the Light of the World when all you know is darkness, and then Jesus answered the unspoken question:

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Who are you?

Look up, and see that God’s will for you is life, at whatever cost God must absorb. And live. That’s who I am.

Later, after the crucifixion, Nicodemus will come to honor and care for the body of Jesus when the life has been taken from it.

He may or may not have had an inkling, even then, that very soon, the light would shine again in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Who are you?

By God's grace, you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—
not the *result* of works, so that no one has anything to brag about—
But we are what God has made us:
created in Christ Jesus *for* good works,
which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

They sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist,
“Who are you?”

He said, “I’m not the Messiah.”

They asked him, “What then, Elijah?”

No.

“The prophet?”

No.

“Well, who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

Paul said to the Corinthians, “I am someone who is nothing if I don’t have love.”

Mother Teresa said, “I am a pencil in the hand of God, who is writing a love letter to the world.”

What do you say about yourself?

Are you the messiah? No.
Elijah? No.
The prophet? No.

But if God can take someone from the darkness,
even a teacher of Israel who can't comprehend Jesus
and knows nothing about the holy spirit,
and one day have that person holding Jesus' crucified body
in love and sacredness and respect;

If God can take an irritated, complaining population of wanderers
and have them looking up and finding life;

If God can take 2,000 years of tormented Church history
and still find us gathered here today
around a flickering flame of faith, hope and love,

Imagine what God can do in this world with you.

Who are you?

You are what God has made you.

And it is very, very good.

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