

Who Am I Called To Be?

A sermon on John 1:6-8, 19-28 & Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11 by Nathan Nettleton, 17 December 2023

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Message

Discovering who we are called to be is an ever-evolving journey as we follow Jesus in changing circumstances.

Sermon

As many of you know, I've spent that last eighteen months in regular psychotherapy. I've just finished that, and it was incredibly helpful. I think it has given me a much better grasp of who I am and who I am called to be. But there were times in the midst of it when I wasn't sure that that was happening. There were times when I felt quite frustrated with it. That frustration was usually because I didn't have any sense of where we were going, or of what sort of me we were reaching for. I had begun with some clearly identifiable problems I wanted to address, but the process of addressing them took me deep inside myself where we began unpacking all sorts of seemingly unrelated things, and for quite a while it all felt a bit meandering and aimless. Looking back, it seems much clearer, but in the middle it was anything but.

I was wanting to stand on tippy toes and catch a glimpse of the future me to give me a sense of direction, but I couldn't see it and so I just had to keep trusting the journey and hoping.

Trusting the journey and hoping is a major theme of this Advent Season. Most of the time we think of that in more external terms: what are we hoping our world will become, and how are we anticipating that God might bring that about? Given the threats our world is facing, including horrific wars, climate crisis, political tribalism, unsustainable population growth, economic chaos and inequality, etc, it is absolutely appropriate to give a lot of attention to our hopes of salvation from all that.

But the questions of how each of us fits into that are also important, and that involves an inward journey too. What is it about who I am and how I tick that makes me part of the problem, and what can I do about that? And what is it about who I am and how I tick that shows me how I can become part of God's solutions, and what can I do about that? Who am I, and who am I being called to become?

In today's gospel reading we heard of John the Baptist facing these kind of identity questions. In his case, the question was being put to him by others. Hearing about what he was up to, religious authorities from Jerusalem came to him and put the question to him, "Who are you? What do you say about yourself?"

John begins with a negative answer. "I am not the Messiah. And I am not Elijah come back."

He's far from alone in starting with the negative. As followers of Jesus, many of us have at times found ourselves so embarrassed by the attitudes and actions of other Christians that we often find ourselves doing the same thing. "I am not that kind of Christian." "I am not a fundamentalist." "I am not one of those wacko, gay-hating, gun-toting Christians."

But just as John the Baptist was pressed for a better answer – "What do you say about yourself then?" – we too cannot really get away with nothing but a negative answer. That was

a part of my problem in therapy. I had a clear enough answer about what I wanted not to be. It was identifying what I was supposed to be instead that I had problems with. And in fact, one of the problems with so many of “those sort of Christians” that we are often so quick to identify ourselves as not being is that they are often mostly identifiable by what they are against, what they reject and campaign against. Lest we fall into just being the flip side of that, an opposite end mirror-image, we need to be opening ourselves up to God’s call on us and finding out clearly what we are standing for, who we are called to be.

John answers that question by turning to the prophet Isaiah:

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

As becomes more obvious a minute later when he says “I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal,” John is defining himself in relation to Jesus. Hence the negative that came first. “I am not the Messiah, but my identity is found in relation to him. I am the voice crying out in the wilderness calling everyone to prepare the way for him.”

We heard a different passage read from the prophet Isaiah tonight, and it was one that Jesus himself later used to identify himself. In a story in Luke’s gospel often known as the Nazareth manifesto, Jesus quotes this passage to introduce himself, who he is and what he’s on about:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour.

As an identity statement, that is one that brings us very clearly into those Advent themes of hoping for change in a troubled world. If you’ve been driven from your home and seen your village go up in flames at the hands of the military regime in Burma, then the promise of One bringing good news to the oppressed and binding up the broken hearted is going to be a lot more than some vague spiritual promise. That’s real hope, right there.

If you are a Palestinian stumbling through the bombed out streets of Gaza, then the promises in the following verses that the ruins will be built up and the devastated cities repaired is going to be the first hint of good news for a while.

As a passage to build an identity statement around, this is one that locates Jesus’s identity squarely in his relationship to a world in need. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me for a purpose in the world, and that purpose will be a breath of hope for a world in need.”

But it is one thing to identify what that meant for Jesus and his sense of who he was, but what does it mean for us? How does it help any of us find out who we are and who we are called to be as followers of Jesus?

The danger, of course, is that as followers of Jesus, we will over-identify ourselves with the identity and mission of Jesus, and imagine ourselves as far more important than we actually are. Yes, we are the body of Christ, and yes we are called to carry on his mission in the world, so the Nazareth manifesto from Isaiah does apply to us too, but the “we” and the “us” in that sentence is very important. “We” are the body of Christ. Not you. Not me. Us.

If I begin to imagine myself as personally inheriting Jesus’s mission as I follow in his footsteps, I am likely to do more harm than good. However well intentioned I might be, that kind of individual zeal is almost certain to feed the worst excesses of my ego and derail me into all sorts of unhealthy attempts to control and manipulate the world and the people around me to bolster my inflated messianic views of myself.

It is not me, or you, that is called to inherit Jesus’s mantle and carry on his mission and ministry in the world. It is us, all of us, the whole of his church in all the world. Together we are the body of Christ, not individually. When the Apostle Paul developed that metaphor of the body of Christ, he explicitly said that we are individually “members” of it. That means that at most, each of us might be a finger or an eye or an ankle in the body of Christ. Like John, none of us is the messiah. But we have our place and our role to play in the body of the Messiah, as the Messiah, Jesus, brings hope and healing to a world in desperate need.

So how do each of us find out place in that? How do I work out whether I am a finger or an eye or an ankle in the body of Christ, and work out what that means in practice?

The answer begins with prayer, which might sound like I’m dodging the question, but don’t worry, I’m not pretending this is the whole answer. But it is a good place to start. In contemplative prayer, we slow down and stop for time to prayerfully listen for the whisperings of God’s Spirit, deep in our souls. There are various ways of doing this, but one of the ways I learned during this recent time of therapy involved intentionally tuning in to my own body and listening for what was going on inside me. We Christians have been fond of saying that Jesus is within us, but we haven’t always followed that lead to listen within our own bodies for what he might be saying to us inside.

Whatever approach we use, prayerful listening is an important part of finding ourselves, because when we are finding our true selves, we will always be finding ourselves in relation to Jesus, and it is Jesus, through his Spirit, who will lead us into that.

Finding our true selves in Jesus, though, is never just an individualistic me-and-Jesus kind of thing. There is no finding ourselves that does not also involve finding our ministry and mission in the world, or to be more accurate, finding our place in the ministry and mission of Jesus in the world. Just as John the Baptist’s answer to the “who am I?” question was a role description or a mission statement, so too we find our place in relation to what the Spirit of Jesus is doing in a broken and needy world.

Our awareness and encounter with the needs of the world will certainly play a part then in our finding of who we are and what we are called to, but don’t be tempted to take that too fast. Just as we are not individually called to be the body of Christ in the world, so too we are not called individually to meet every need in the world. The existence of a need, and even your proximity to it, does not in itself constitute a call. But it may be part of one.

Discerning your calling, your vocation as part of Christ's body, will usually involve both paying attention to the real needs of the world at any given time, and prayerfully discerning your own passions, gifts and interests. God loves you deeply, and will not normally demand of you tasks that do not connect with who you are, with your skills and interests. God knows who you are better than you know yourself, and knows the mission and tasks in which you will truly flourish and find meaning. Finding yourself, and finding God's specific call on your life, will usually take you into the spaces where your skills and passions overlap with the real and pressing needs of the world around you.

But finding ourselves, and finding our role in the body, is an ever evolving journey. We change and grow, and the world around us changes too. So those overlap spaces may not be the same as they were last year. As the world changes, and new situations and issues create new urgent needs, our skills and passions may be best redeployed in new ways and new places. Christ's mission of bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty and release to the prisoners, and the rebuilding of the ruins continues, but its specific application in any given place is constantly changing, and so too then our place in it is likely to continue to evolve.

Ultimately, the mission is much bigger than us, and that's good news. The mission of Christ in the world does not depend on us getting it right. We have the enormous privilege of being involved in it, and finding our place and our true identity within it, but it is not all up to us. Like John the Baptist said, there is one coming after us who is the real deal, who will ultimately bring the world to its fulfilment, and us with it. As the Apostle Paul concluded in our other reading (1 Thessalonians 5:24), the one who calls you is faithful, and the one who calls you will do it.